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But, as she slipped down the launching ways "Gimpy" Small, a drunken dockyard worker, was killed. She was launched in blood. The moment he died he complicated a dozen lives.

"Launched in blood, live in blood" the old sea-front legend goes. And *Charon* added to it.

From Iceland to Limerick men waited and watched for her to live up to the legend. How many would she kill before she was killed herself? And in how long?

Is there some mystic quality in a ship not planned by her builders? Can a ship have a soul; a soul as black as the seventh hell? Can a ship love? Can a ship hate? Or is it just a mechanical contrivance built for men and abused by men who blame their own weaknesses on to the ship?

It is an unusual story with an unusual treatment. Men's lives are intertwined with *Charon* until they reach their destiny. Their strengths, their weaknesses, their vices and their virtues are part of the pattern as indeed are the lives of the women they leave behind.

But the story is that of a ship and the sea: of a price demanded and a price paid.

TO ENDLESS NIGHT

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Two of the outstanding points in Ewart Brookes' first and best-selling novel *Proud Waters* were the true-to-life salty tang of the dialogue and his descriptions of the sea in all its moods. As one writer said: "When writing of a gale he makes one feel the labouring of the ship, the vicious, relentless power of the sea".

In this novel, written by a man who has lived at sea, knows it, respects, fears and loves it; there is again the full-blooded characterization, the tough dialogue, clear cut as with a diamond. There is again the almost awe-inspiring descriptions of the fury of gales in all their majesty. There is also a sympathetic—almost tender—understanding of the frailties of even the strongest and above all there is a love for ships.

By the same author:

PROUD WATERS

EWART BROOKES

TO ENDLESS NIGHT

"Never you hope to look on heaven-behold !
I come to ferry you across the tide
To endless night, fierce fires and shramming cold."
Canto 116, Dante's *Inferno*.



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'To my daughter JOCELYN and my son PETER
(in order of seniority) whose understanding
increases as the years pass, and whose undiluted
admiration is a constant stimulus.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

THIS is the story of a ship. It is true men—and occasionally women—appear in the story, because men and ships are indivisible. But one man appears early in the story to continue to the end. The others are threads which serve to add colour as do the threads in a weave of tweed.

It is a moot point among seamen both abaft and before the mast as to whether a ship has something which passes for a soul.

How can there possibly be such a something? You may ask. Unroll the plans of any ship on a good flat table and inspect them. Nowhere in the design, not even tucked away in some unwanted corner is there a small compartment marked 'accommodation for one soul'.

The men who design ships linger over their drawing boards cunningly contriving a design which has a long credit account in the Bank of Experience and when they have finished they have drawn a mechanical device for the service of man. A machine to be driven by wind, or steam, or motor.

Stresses, strains, the power and weakness of curves, the thrusts and wringing angles will have to have all been calculated to the fourth decimal point. There will be spaces drawn for engines, cargo, fuel, living-quarters—every inch of space accounted for. Nothing marked: 'accommodation for one soul'.

Then the builders will take over. Band saws will rip and whine in the patternmakers shops, riveting hammers will clang musically, gaunt red ribs will climb from yard floor level, plates will be swung upwards and clamorously put into position until she stands complete—all but for her engines—a mass of sleek, suave curves.

Nobody has stolen a little space and built it in for 'accommodation of one soul'.

The engines bed down snugly, with the boilers before them,

fitting to a fraction of an inch. No space stolen or wasted there.

Comes the day when a bottle crashes against her newly painted bow. She is named, slips down the slipway to meet the puny wavelets, small envoys of the more powerful element she will encounter. . . . And suddenly the ship has acquired something which resembles a soul.

Arrant, confused, muddle-headed superstitious thinking?

Of course, it is. How can a ship have a soul? It is merely a mechanical contrivance made for and by man for his lawful—and sometimes unlawful—occasions.

Yet, what is it which can possess a ship and make her a devil incarnate (and all incarnate devils, being the ultimate in devils are 'shes'), turn her into a man breaker, a man killer, a thing with a warped and twisted something which glories in sheer devilry?

Sailors have a superstition that if a ship kills a man during her construction, or her launching, then she will be unlucky, to say the least, and will be packed with all hell's troubles down to her Plimsoll line.

Let us agree at once, that it is pitiful superstition born of a paucity of thought and lucid thinking—and too many waking hours at night.

Yet, there is the classic example, the *Great Eastern*. Did she not play hell and Tommy in her thirty years of life? Did she not smash other ships, maim men, bring disaster to others? And did they not find the skeletons of a man and a boy hidden away in her fabric when she was broken up?

I knew five ships when I sailed as a junior officer in the Merchant Service. They were all much alike, built to the same specifications, for the same trade and by neighbouring yards.

I sailed on two of them and knew—fairly intimately—two more. They were gentle docile creatures and when balanced with the cargo distributed according to the craft of the chief officers they would bravely face the elements saying, "Come the four corners of the earth. . . ." Nice ships.

The fifth was a bloodthirsty, callous creature with the disposition of an ageing dockside harlot. She broke two captains,

killed three men at sea, injured several more before finally taking her entire crew, down with her in a quite moderate North Atlantic gale, sailing under a foreign flag.

Write it down as coincidence that at her launching a wire parted and nearly cut a tugman in half so that he died in the space of three long breaths.

Of the ships I commanded during the war two were of the built-by-the-mile-and-cut-off-by-the-yard type. In all there were about thirty or forty of them all built to the same design down to and including the handles on the doors.

The first one was a ballerina. I could do almost anything with her in any weather. I could call on her (and did) for almost impossible tasks in almost impossible conditions. She loved nothing more than a tight corner with but inches to spare, a wind screaming in baffled rage and she would bring to the soul of any man a prideful joy as she gaily flicked her stern in the air and tripped daintily through it all.

Only once did I fail her by a terrible error of judgement. A lot of men died and she grieved with me. I could feel it.

Several times after that she showed me what should be done and Providence will lay it to my credit that men are now alive today who by fairly long odds should be fathoms deep in that sleep from which there is one awakening.

And she rejoiced with me. She was that sort of ship.

Her sister, my next in that type? What grey hairs I have, and what deep lines are permanently engraved on my face were greyed and graven by her.

She would deceive by a flattering docility, save up her devilry for an acute and vital moment—then would go completely mad, stark staring raving mad. And when we tried, in the depths of our mystified misery, to pick up the pieces she would be docility itself again.

There was the time. . . . Enough. Let me forget her with the same resolution as I like to remember her sister.

So. We have arrived at a point where we say a ship has no soul. A ship CANNOT have a soul. Ships are just steel girders, angles, plates and engines.

The fact that a man is killed when a ship is launched is pure mischance and can have no effect on a ship's future, or that something which passes for her soul.

Have it your way.

But, I knew a ship such as *Charon*. This is remarkably like her story. Soul or no soul she was a Pandora box of mayhem and trouble.

January 1954

EWART BROOKES.

BOOK I

CHAPTER I

‘FROM SENIOR Naval Officer, Iceland, to Admiralty (repeat Commander Patrols, Iceland) 15.1.1944. Subject. HMS *Charon*.

At 0400 hrs. Jan. 1, 1944 Norwegian tanker *Skarvik* reported that she had lost touch with convoy PQ 32 and had been torpedoed in position approx. 14.10 W, 63 N and was slowly sinking. Weather had deteriorated, with prolonged snow squalls, wind NNE force 9-10. Sinking ship was rapidly becoming top heavy with ice, lifeboats useless.

At 0430 destroyers *Cresta* and *Crawley* were dispatched with rescue tug *Saviour*.

Weather forecast was ‘similar condition to prevail for further indeterminate period’.

According to the plot the only ship adjacent to *Skarvik* was Asdic trawler *Charon*, 35 miles away mean distance.

At 1500 hours *Saviour* reported engine trouble which would compel her to heave to for several hours. *Cresta* remained with *Saviour*, *Crawley* continued search for *Skarvik*.

At 0915 Jan 2 *Charon* established wireless contact reporting she had taken off crew of *Skarvik* and had sunk ship by gun-fire.

At 1450 hrs. Jan. 3 *Charon* entered anchorage and requested ambulance drifter for seven stretcher cases, six from crew of the tanker, one was from her own crew, a man suffering from fractured skull.

After transferring injured men *Charon* signalled at 1520 hrs. ‘Am resuming patrol’.

Otto Lindstrom, master of the tanker (report attached) expresses the opinion that but for superlative seamanship of Commanding Officer of *Charon*, Lieutenant Oliver Paton,

RNVR, he and his crew would have been lost. There were constant snow squalls making visibility extremely low, a heavy sea was running and both ships were badly iced up.

Paton ultimately brought *Charon* around (see report) and effected the rescue by use of Carley floats and small rafts.

Charon was due to be relieved at 1600 hrs. by HMS *Gallie* Jan. 5. . . ." (*Vide Admiralty reports.*)

The two men sat in the well-furnished office, both in well upholstered easy chairs with a bottle of whisky resting on the table between them.

Although both had their lives inextricably woven into ships, and both were obviously men of authority, there the similarity ceased.

Milbourne Winton, Managing Director, virtual owner of the Modern Steamship Building Company looked considerably younger than his fifty-two years. A slight speckle of grey at the temples seemed to emphasize his youth rather than accentuate that he was over the half-way mark.

A first and casual glance would have classified him physically as slight, tall for his weight, but a second and detailed scrutiny would have shown the square shoulders tapering down to slim hips.

It was his cool, almost cold grey eyes, the colour of fractured steel which caught and held.

Somebody once said of him, after an interview, 'he doesn't look at you, he slowly moves his eyes to meet yours, then pounces with them'.

It was as good a description as any, but this could have been added. Once he pounced he held what he caught in a level, discerning gaze.

At the moment his cool, dispassionate gaze was on the man opposite, a man totally dissimilar to him in nearly every way.

Ben Christian was short, thick set, a large, well-shaped head was set deeply down between his shoulders giving him the appearance of having scarcely any neck. This was due to the

almost abnormal muscular development and not to any deformity.

Christian had built those muscles when he was a deck-hand on trawlers, now with their overlay of late middle-age fat from good living it gave him the appearance of a rather easy-natured bull, head lowered, not quite certain whether to use up enough energy in a short charge or not.

It was an intimidating appearance emphasized by his habit of barking 'what?' at everybody, due to a slight deafness. A stranger, or a trembling underling meeting him for the first time found it devastating. Christian would sit, shoulders hunched as if building himself up for a crushing charge. He would see lips move and hear the indistinct drone of a voice. Then he would bark 'what?' almost demoralizing the speaker when all he wanted was to hear what was being said.

Like most slightly deaf people his conversation was pitched in a low key.

Milbourne Winton had known Christian a long time but never ceased to marvel at the soft deep musical bass voice, roughened slightly by the harsh northern accent.

"I reckon she's the heaviest trawler ever built." Christian's eyes were looking out of the window over the compact shipyard to where a red hull lay legged and poised on a slipway ready for launching. "T'Germans have got some longer, by fifteen—perhaps twenty feet—but they got such raking bows that holding them up to half a gale with trawl down must be quite a job."

Winton realized that Christian was thinking out loud rather than making conversation. He did not reply but nodded gently at the reference to the difficulty of handling a ship in half a gale.

If any man breathing knew trawlers in all their moods, and under all conditions it was Ben Christian. He had gone to sea at ten years old, cook boy on a Yarmouth smack. Gone to sea when his mother followed his father leaving him an orphan at ten years old.

Ben's father was drowned in a winter gale and a few weeks

later his mother was found dead on the beach, left there by the receding tide.

Her brother, who part owned and skippered a sailing trawler, took the boy to sea with him.

As the years succeeded each other Ben climbed slowly from boy to deck-hand, and at twenty-three was mate to his uncle. He could scarcely read, but clung passionately to the rudiments of education he had painfully gathered at the same school he attended until his family was suddenly cut down from three to one small boy.

The stick-and-string smack met the fate of most of the old sailing trawlers. A vicious sea, backed by two smaller creaming crests caught her on her beam ends. Long and painfully she struggled, but with one mast gone, the other badly sprung and a welter of tangled gear hanging over the quarter, with a lee shore creeping closer every minute the ultimate result was foregone.

Ben's first clear recollection after that night was sitting in front of a roaring fire in The Seamen's Institute where they broke the news to him that his uncle had gone with the ship.

He stayed on at the Institute until he got another job, down a grade, on another smack, but during his stay he found a dog-eared *Old Manual of Seamanship*. When he left it lay hidden in the bottom of his sea bag. That was his sole reading matter for a couple of years. What it contained he learned by heart because he had to slowly mouth each word as he read.

From deck-hand he climbed to mate again, then to skipper, voluntarily down-graded himself once more to sail in steam trawlers, climbed to skipper and earned a reputation which rebounded from fishing port to fishing port.

The men on the Castle trawlers out of Swansea and Milford, the hard-bitten men in Fleetwood, Aberdeen's canny fishermen, and the semi trawlermen semi explorers of Hull and Grimsby knew him as 'Ben the Bastard'. He would fish when other men hove to and wondered if the hammering, slugging seas would get worse—and yet let them live.

"Ben the Bastard, but by Christ you get a good living with him."

His stored money grew to four figures and the trawling company's accountant initiated Ben into the mild intricacies of banking. Alongside other books, all on trawling, or deep-sea fishing, or other lands, in his little bookcase in his snug room under the bridge stood another slim book with neat figures in columns.

Ben often surveyed them and watched the total grow.

He brought off an almost impossible salvage feat on a stricken ship in the North Sea and an admiring Admiralty Court awarded him an almost astronomical sum—and the figures in his little book reached equally astronomical heights.

When he left the multi trawler owning concern with which he was star skipper and shipped with a small firm owning only two old ships, men wondered. Ben Christian seldom did anything foolish, and if he did he never did it twice, so they wondered. The ships had barely made a living, principally because they had never been anything but hangers on.

The skippers who sailed in them did so because they could get nothing else. If they scratched a shade over a bare living they were content. They fished by stalking other and more successful skippers. When they saw a dan buoy down they fished hopefully.

The deck-hands were of similar character. Enough from one trip for a riotous night out, another of sleeping it off, and they were glad to get out again, to earn more for another night or two.

Ben took them one trip, drove them until they retired to their bunks with hatred in their souls, tears not far from their eyes, an unbelievable weariness in their bones—but more money due to them than they had had in any four trips under previous skippers.

When they recovered from a full three days' carousal they wanted to ship with him again. Ben's reply sent them reeling away with burning ears. It was to the effect that if they were solid lead and he had to sail in a top-heavy dinghy he would prefer not to have them.

Within fairly wide limits Ben had a fine command of the spoken word.

He drew better to him, filled his fish holds with prime fish, disappeared from the over-fished Dogger, sailed into the North, took his bearings from the Faroes, and twice in three months made and broke records for a catch.

In three years the firm lifted itself from near liquidation to prosperity, then Ben put his proposition.

He became a partner with control of policy. Young skippers, ambitious and anxious, listened earnestly as he talked and went on equalling his records, but never beating them until Ben said "We must have bigger ships. On those new grounds you can fill two thousand boxes in the same length trip, at the same steaming and wages costs. These old trawlers are wasteful."

So it was.

Ben Christian's classics began to take the water. *Andromeda*, *Perseus*, *Circes*, *Minerva*, all around 400 tons, with a 2,000 boxes capacity and 11 knots to hurry it home—and they showed which way Ben's latest reading was leaning.

His introduction—and liking for the classics came by way of a greater passion.

On a trip to London, when trawler owners were asked to a confidential meeting in the Admiralty, he met Elaine Porter at the subsequent dinner.

Cool, sweet to look upon, a wonderful head of true nordic golden hair and deep violet blue eyes to match proved too much for Ben's defences.

She was considered to be almost the property of a successful Junior Minister. No official engagement had been announced. Elaine was showing a proper degree of reluctance, albeit carried to the ultimate in the Junior Minister's opinion.

Elaine was there to grace the party and impress the hard northerners. She bowled one completely over. By the time the evening was over she had committed herself to an appointment as guide and mentor for a shopping trip in the West End the next morning with Ben.

It was a successful trip from the word 'go'.

Had Ben been doing the shopping alone—and he knew exactly what he wanted—he would have stalked in, asked to see

the article, scrutinized it, asked the price and would have said shortly, 'wrap it up' or 'put it back'.

He enjoyed the niceties she introduced. She was fascinated by this half-polished stone which she recognized as a diamond.

"Does your wife like opals?" she asked over a coffee in an interval from shop window gazing.

Ben looked at her levelly.

"I'm not married." One eyebrow climbed slightly, a trick she found at once engaging and disturbing. "Yet"—he completed the sentence.

Elaine subdued a slight feeling of excitement. "Forgive me. I . . . well . . . you have bought this morning a quite expensive fur coat, a good opal ring . . . and a cigarette case obviously for a lady. I thought. . . ."

Ben chuckled deep down in his throat.

"T'fur coat I'm buying for my top skipper. He could get the same in Hull or Grimsby, but his wife will swank more, like, as it comes from London. The ring is for a girl in the office—she's done a tremendous amount of hard work for me and I overheard her telling one of t'other girls that she was saving up for an opal ring. That's October's stone isn't it?" he wound up anxiously.

"It is. It was stupid of me to jump to conclusions. I . . ."

"Cigarette case is for another lady who has been kind. She likes that sort of thing. So . . ." he put his hand in his pocket, pulled out the slim package and laid it near her arm.

"Please," he pleaded as she pulled her arm away.

From then onwards it was a tumultuous courtship. The remainder of the owners delegation returned north after two days. Ben stayed ten and Elaine found her fascination growing every day.

He could not dance, but he took her dining and cigarette ends piled up in the ash-trays as he talked to her, told her of his early life, his ambitions, of some of the technicalities of trawling, of its heart-breaks and its triumphs.

The Junior Minister started to worry and provoked just what he hoped to ward away. A decision by Elaine.

Ben proposed to her the last night he remained in London. It was no hesitant proposal. He had worked out his course and speed, and embarked.

"I've never had much room for women," he said deeply. "Until I met you, for me they were just around. Now I find myself wondering what you would think of something I'm going to do. I find myself wondering what it will be like when you are not there. Maybe some bright hero in a film would say 'I'll die for you'. I won't say that. But I'll promise I'll live for you—live every minute of life for you. Will you marry me?"

There have been worse proposals.

Elaine asked for time to think it over. She tried to separate fascination from a deeper emotion. It was the Junior Minister who helped her. His tardy proposal followed on Ben's. It was a mincing, carefully worded affair which pointed out the decided social advantage it would be to her.

Elaine told him of Ben's proposal, asked for time to think.

"Good lord, the man will whisk you off to the frozen north and you'll live in a perpetual smell of fish," he protested.

She looked at his glassy pomaded hair, his slightly powdered close-shaven face.

"There are worse smells, I imagine," she said coldly.

When he had departed in a disturbed frame of mind on an impulse she picked up the telephone and was put through to Ben's hotel. He was packing when he received the call.

She meant it to be a more or less formal farewell lunch invitation.

"Ben?" They had reached that stage.

"Elaine."

The telephone was mute for a few seconds.

"Ben, you asked me something last night."

"Go ahead."

"Yes."

The phone was mute again.

"Ben—Ben—are you there?"

But Ben was half-way down the stairs, not waiting for the lift.

A fat, greasy-faced Jew, about to climb into a taxi, was unceremoniously hustled aside as Ben jumped into it. His protest died as Ben smote him on the back.

"Plenty more. How long will it take you to get to . . ." he gave Elaine's address to the driver.

"Twenty minutes," the cadaverous Jehu replied cautiously.

"Do it in fifteen and you're on to a quid," Ben said sitting back.

For three years they were deliriously happy until she died giving him a daughter who grew to be a miniature Elaine and on her Ben lavished his all in more or less vain effort to ease his grief.

It was in that three years he picked up a book she was reading, found the name Perseus.

"Right good name for a trawler, that. I'm fed up wi' *Morning Stars* and *Golden Lights*. Any more like that?"

She introduced him to the classics, the names grew, *Adromeda*, *Perseus*, *Circes*, *Minerva*.

A little while before the baby was born she told him of the grim fabled character who waits, sculling gently to hold against the tide, waiting patiently for people to come down through the Shades, to come down to be ferried over the Styx, the patient ferryman who can afford to wait because ultimately everybody steps aboard.

When Ben ordered his latest ship from the builders nobody knew what her name was to be. Even when she sat on the greased stocks waiting for the top of the tide to lap around her rudder she was still 'Job number 556'.

Ben's daughter, well coached, was to launch her, had rehearsed and had the name pat at the tip of her tongue.

"She'll have to work hard to fill 3,000 boxes, but I've got the man to make her do it."

Winton stirred slightly.

"What IS she to be named?" he asked.

Ben stood up.

"They're coming into the yard now," he nodded briefly

towards a car steering slowly through the gates. "Name?" He stubbed out his cigar. "You'll hear my daughter christen her." He smiled briefly. "Just a fad I have."

Winton poured out two more drinks and handed one to Christian.

"Good luck, Christian," Winton said with a brief nod toward the window.

"Thanks. She'll need it. Only the best men will do for her."

"You've got the best we can do in her. There were moments when I had my doubts about one or two points you have insisted on, but. . . ." He finished his drink and smiled at the trawler owner.

At a tap on the door they turned to it as it opened.

Christian's young daughter, barely eight years old had all the colouring of her mother, and a promise of her beauty. As she stood smiling up at her father Winton tried to find some characteristic of the male parent in the child, but failed.

"I think we will find everything ready," he said after he had greeted the child and the older companion with her. "We have . . ." he glanced at his watch, "roughly quarter of an hour to top of the tide. Shall we go into the yard?"

Near the bow of the hull was a small wooden platform, bunting decorated, from which the ceremony would be performed.

Ben held his daughter's hand as they climbed to the platform.

"D'you know what you have to say?" he asked her smilingly.

"I've been saying it all the morning, Daddy. I take the bottle, let it swing, and when it hits the ship I say. . . ."

"And give it a good swing, break the bottle but don't hit a hole in my new ship, will you?"

Two earnest men in bowler hats, the yard manager and boss rigger stood at the foot of the platform in earnest conversation with Winton for a few moments. They all compared watches, looked down the yard to where the line of lead-coloured water was lapping lazily, its limits defined clearly by a fringe of wood chips, shavings, streaks of paint and other rubbish. On

either side of the hull on the ground near here were piles of chain, red rusty, heaped in orderly array. When the hull started its slow journey to meet the water for the first time the chains would successively take the strain, would check the impulsive rush for the first greeting, would finally hold her steady when she was waterborne.

Winton climbed to the platform and took the bottle of champagne from a rack. From the neck of it stretched a long ribbon reaching up to the stem-head of the ship.

From beneath the hull came sounds of hollow hammering, occasionally the rattle would be punctuated by a deeper 'plock' as another retaining block was knocked away.

Winton handed the bottle to the little girl. Shyly she looked up, wide eyed at her father.

He eyed the hull narrowly for a moment, saw a faint tremble vibrate it.

"Let it go, love, give it a good swing," he said and slipped an encouraging arm over her shoulder.

The tethered bottle swung in an arc toward the bow, splintered, and the champagne gushed out making a slight darker stain over the red paint.

The child's voice rang out clearly, confidently.

"I name this ship *Charon*, and may God preserve all who sail in her."

A ragged cheer lifted from the small group of workmen standing near the foot of the platform. Slowly, but with gathering speed the hull slipped down the ways, stout wire ropes snaked after her raising little clouds of rust, the piled-up chains began to take the strain, in a musical jangle the links disappeared from the piles and became a long, sliding red-brown serpent.

Above the jangle and ragged cheers a high-pitched scream soared upwards, reached almost cracking point—then was cut off sharply.

Men scurried down each side of the slipway dodging the snaking lengths of chain as they ran. In a few minutes the yard manager came back and Winton climbed down anxiously to speak to him.

Winton regained his place on the platform and whispered in Christian's ear. Christian turned to the woman.

"Take her into the office, I'll be along shortly," he said.

The little girl looked up at him, bewilderment and concern on her face.

"I did it all right, didn't I, Daddy?" she asked anxiously.

Christian smiled at her and patted her on the head.

"Perfectly, my love. But there's been a bit of an accident. A man's been hurt. Go along, now. I'll be with you in a few minutes."

Charon, newly launched, still red in her builders' paint, lifted gently on the breast of the water waiting for the tugs to take her over.

Christian looked at her shrewdly as she swung in the tide, she floated just about at what he estimated she would, already her powerful flared bows showed some of the strength which would be hers.

Half-way down the slip a little group of men stood silent. At their feet lay a figure covered by now with the boss-rigger's crumpled and stained raincoat.

"It's 'Gimpy' Small," the yard manager offered as Winton and Christian reached the group. "I can't make out what happened. He seems to have been caught up in the chains. I can think of no reason for him being there. He's . . . he's smashed up a lot . . . dead all right."

Winton asked a few brusque questions which assured him that a doctor and ambulance had been summoned and with a few more words to the manager he turned away with Christian.

"I'm extremely sorry, Mr. Christian, indeed," he said as they walked back to the office.

"It's not your fault any more than it's mine," the trawler owner replied.

As they reached the door of the office he turned once more to look at his new craft. Then he followed Winton in.

Down the yard the men shuffled their feet and muttered.

"Tid'n good luck to kill a man at a launching," one said in deep, hoarse tones.

"It's bad to kill a man any time," the manager snapped back sharply. "A couple of you wait until the stretcher comes. The rest of you . . ." he trailed off into a string of technical orders.

The group diminished.

"A ship as kills a man in her making or launching never has any luck. She always has to pay the price," one of the men muttered doggedly as he moved away with his mates. "It's happened before, it'll happen again."

"True," offered another. "Didn't *North Star* kill a painter? Didn't she have collision after collision? Didn't she go down three years after?"

So a legend was born. *Charon* was a killer. She had demanded and had exacted her price in blood, not the produce of the grape.

As the car drove away from the yard with Christian and his daughter inside, Milbourne Winton stood at the window looking at the newly launched ship.

"*Charon*," he whispered. "The ferryman who waits. Well, there wasn't much waiting for the first one."

CHAPTER II

BILL 'GIMPY' SMALL stared at his own reflection in the stained mirror behind the bar. To him it was a hazy, blurred blob. In fact he did not recognize himself. At the moment the whole world had a faint rosy hue. The many minor problems he had were thrust out of sight and his whole existence revolved around the money he had in his pocket and what was contained in the two glasses in front of him.

In the immediate past was a recollection of uproarious popularity, a recollection of men hanging on his every word, greeting his humorous sallies with strident laughter, accepting his portentous utterings with the solemnity of a pronouncement by a Cabinet Minister.

It was a transient popularity because Gimpy was pushing the

boat out, Gimpy dipped down into his pocket as successive round followed successive emptying of glasses.

And now the bar was deserted, his sycophants gone leaving behind them only a glow in 'Gimpy's' breast, an alcoholic diffused assurance that he was a fine fellow, one of the best.

The barman expertly polished a glass, glanced at the clock over the mirror, automatically deducted the ten minutes lead on correct time—an affliction suffered by all public house clocks.

"Goin' to the match, Gimp?"

Gimpy lifted his head slowly, almost ponderously, and tried with only partial success to bring the barman's face into focus. He failed, rocked slightly on his heels and looked down at the bar as if to bring the whole weight of his intellect on a profound question.

The barman knew the signs and waited.

Gimpy looked up again. "N-no. Gotter a launching 'sarternoon. T-t-toper the tide. . . . 'Arp pas' three." The mention of time sent his wavering eyes questing toward the clock and the barman correctly interpreted the look.

"You got lots of time. Only just gone 'arp pas' two."

Gimpy delved into his pocket and extracted a fist full of money. Over this he brooded for a moment or two, selected a coin and dropped it on the counter.

"Gimme 'nother whisky. I got enough bi-rrir."

While the barman executed the order Gimpy looked once more at the fist full of money.

Eleven hours overtime in that hand. A man could afford to drink whisky chasers, a man could afford to have friends, friends who would be here now if they hadn't to go to the soccer match. He, too, would have been with them, sternly critical on the cheap bank if it wasn't for the launching. 'Arp pas' three. Time enough.

As the barman placed the small glass in front of him Gimpy slurred, "'Ave a drink, on me. 'Ave a short one. 'Ave a chaser."

"Thanks."

The barman performed mysterious rites with his back to the bar, turned and raised a small glass to his lips.

"Good luck."

"Same to y-y-you."

The barman smacked his lips, a mixture of beer and water, drunk quickly had looked genuine enough to deceive all but the most wary.

"That'll be half a dollar."

Gimpy delved once more into his pocket, selected the coin and passed it over.

Deftly the barman rang up 'no sale', shut the till, rang '6d.' and turned to make more conversation, slightly glowing at the quick mental arithmetic which assured him that the drunken man before him had contributed nearly eight shillings to his personal account that afternoon.

"What's it this afternoon?" he asked pleasantly.

"Trawler. Overtime and a b-b-bonus from owners. Biggest trawler in t'world. We built it."

Pride brought Gimpy so upright that he teetered backwards slightly and grabbed at the bar to steady himself. "Daughter of the owner is goin' to launch her. There'll be drink all round. An' a bonus," he reiterated.

"Pity you'll miss the match," the barman offered swabbing skilfully along the counter. With equal skill he removed a quarter full glass of beer, dipped the glass into a bowl of mud-coloured water, semi-dried it and held it expectantly in his hand.

Gimpy looked mildly surprised at his lone whisky, lifted the gaze to the barman.

"Gimme a bi-i-irrer. 'Ave a drink yourself."

To embark on the sparkling sea of popularity demanded its ritual.

Swiftly the barman executed the order, worked out the cost, added threepence, registered sixpence less on the till to show himself a net profit of ninepence. That took care of the tot of whisky and spillage would cover the loss on the bitter.

"They'll lose anyway," Gimpy returned to the barman's opening gambit. "'Arf back line's no bloody use."

Like most stern critics of football Gimpy went to watch his home team win. Failing that a draw or a wrangle.

A lost match was a waste of time to him.

The clock hands crept on inexorably as the maudlin analysis of the local team progressed until the barman looked up, rejoiced in the illicit ten minutes advance and said, with a faint tinge of pseudo regret in his voice.

"Time gents, and that means you, Gimpy." He reached out for the almost empty glasses in front of the drunken man. His eyebrows raised in a quick query.

"One for the road, don' want any bi-i-irrer. Jus' a scotch." Gimpy reacted almost automatically to the depraved but skilled psychologist facing him.

Having disposed of his drink Gimpy raised a wobbly hand in salute, turned and with exaggerated careful steps weaved his way in a half circle toward the door.

"Mind she doesn't hit you on the head with the bottle and launch you," the barman called.

Gimpy stood with the half-open door firmly clutched in his hand as he digested this pleasantry.

"Bloody good that, min' she doesn't. . . ." He chuckled inanely for a moment.

"Thash whole idea, 'it t'ship with bottle. Not me . . . 'ave a hell of a job to launch me . . . bloody good that."

The door suddenly withdrew its sturdy support and Gimpy staggered outwards. He recovered himself, put his head inside the bar once more, raised one hand in salute.

"So long, see you t-t-tonight."

The barman completed his swift mopping of the bar, glanced at the clock and walked toward the door humming softly to himself.

"Launch you," he sneered. He caught sight of himself in the glass, accentuated the sneer, smoothed down his already glossy hair. "Launch you. Blimy. You're damn nearly afloat now."

After one quick glance down the street he withdrew, slid the bolt home on the door and returned behind the bar to engage in the more pleasant, more concrete task of making up the takings with sufficient skill to hide his extractions.

The fresh air steadied Gimpy slightly and cleared his head

sufficiently enough for him to appreciate that if the foreman rigger or yard manager saw him he would be in serious trouble.

He passed the yard gates all right, walked cautiously down the length of the bare hull of the ship waiting to be launched.

The yard was going round dizzily and occasionally he stumbled but he reached his objective.

Hazily he visualized that if he could find somewhere to sit quietly for a few minutes, perhaps even doze for a while he would rouse up with a colossal headache, but capable of doing the simple task allotted to him, and capable of keeping out of trouble.

He sat down laboriously behind a pile of rusted chain secure from any eyes at the bow of the ship or around the small platform.

Wearily he rested his head against the pile of chain and let the world swing as it wanted.

In the deep recesses of his mind he heard a faint rumble growing louder, transmuting itself into a tremble. Through a haze of alcohol, which still had the world lurching unsteadily he searched for a reason, for a cause for this rumble, almost musical in its resonance.

Suddenly a wire, snaking out from between his feet wriggled into life, tautened and twanged. Above him the bulk of the hull of the ship loomed and slid past.

The launching was on. He started to rise to his feet. The chain, in an orderly pile shivered as the wire took the strain, then the weight. As he reached a crouching position the rusted links started to follow the wire rope, his feet were swept from under him, he fell, clutching the chain. As if impatient at the restraining hand it whipped savagely throwing him over so that the links rolled over his prostrate body. A thin scream left his lips. The impatient chain, angry now at the obstruction whipped again, moved its hold to his chest and neck cutting off the thin scream and remorselessly ground him into the rusty dust of the yard.

The chain pursued the retreating hull, took the full weight, checked the ship, together with the other chains, lifted once and dropped with a subdued clang. Its task was complete. The

twisted, broken object which had been an obstruction lay still under the bar-tight chain.

At the inquest the barman lied with facile ease. In fact it would have been difficult to pin his evidence down to a lie. He evaded certain obvious facts and stressed others to present a nicely coloured story to the coroner and the seven stolid men on the jury.

Mr. Small had stayed in the bar with him until closing time discussing football. He seemed all right when he left and joked lightly about the launching. In his opinion Mr. Small was not under the influence of drink when he left. It was Mr. Small who said he would have to hurry back to the yard because they had a launching that day.

The yard manager and the foreman rigger (conscious that they had lingered overlong at a lunch-time drink) slightly tinged their evidence with the requisite colouring.

No, they noticed nothing untoward about Small. He was an experienced man in the yard. He would have a specific job to do at a launching which would take him near the length of chain which had killed him. They could only assume that after doing his simple task in a manner befitting a true British workman, he had inadvertently tripped over the chain.

The foreman rigger added that he saw Small at a distance, shortly before the ceremony and he appeared to be going towards his allotted task.

The doctor, who had been called from a pleasant Saturday afternoon, arrayed his perfunctory examination in a splendid cloak of long-winded medical language, which abbreviated meant that Small had suffered multiple injuries any one of which would have been fatal, glossed over any suggestion of intoxication. Small had taken some intoxicating drink, he could not say the quantity or whether it was enough to incapacitate him.

With an understanding smile toward the coroner he added that from what he had heard at that inquest it seemed obvious that the man had drunk only a few lunch-time beers (the barman still having a keen eye to his perquisites had started that 'few

beers' hare in full and open flight) and knowing the British working man's capacity for holding beer he was prepared to agree that he was not drunk when the accident occurred.

And so the coroner, taking a deep breath disposed of the matter in a few sentences, put a verdict into the mouth of the jury's foreman 'Accidental Death' adding a rider that no blame was attached to the firm and everybody went out into the spring sunshine more or less satisfied.

It was *Charon* which had killed 'Gimpy' Small, killed him the minute she was launched. The legend grew, rooted firmly, and soon Small's name was dropped from it and became just the man killed by *Charon*.

Men quoted chapter and verse of other ships which had killed men in their making or launching, all of which had ultimately paid the price.

Other ships, which had been built in the yard, and were subsequently built there, would stir a response from the chords of memory when their names were mentioned, but after the brief plucking the chords would die away quickly swallowed in the greater volume of contemporary events.

When *Charon* was towed away to be fitted with boilers she was not forgotten.

The tugmen, leaning over the tug's rail looked at her critically.

"Big bastard, for a trawler, ain' she?"

"Aye, be all of 500 tons time they have her ready. It was her as killed a man the day she was launched. Smashed him to bits, they say. Shook him like a rat. Smack a bit of grease on that slip hook. Charlie, its bin working a bit stiff last few days."

When she did her measured-mile engine trials other trawlers sailing in or out of the port gave her the traditional toot on the steam whistle, and permitted her the honour of an extra scrutiny.

"Three thousand boxes she'll have to fill to give her skipper a fair earnings. Three thousand kit will take some getting." So the talk went as men watched her, white bone in her teeth, slipping through the water at a good knot over the specified speed.

"It was her as killed a bloke when she was launched. 'Tis bad luck for a trawler to kill a man."

"Trawlers are always killing men. What's different about that one?"

"They say it's bad luck for any ship to kill a man when she's being built or launched. She will have to pay the price and in five years so they say."

"Who's 'they' for Christ's sake? Who's 'they'? Those dames I saw you with last night? I'll bet you paid the price then, not in five years time. Especially the fat blonde one."

Through a gale of laughter. "Anyway I like 'em that shape. Something to. . ."

And the stage was cleared for general discussion on the eternal topic which is to be heard in any fo'c'sle, ward-room, officers' mess, sergeants' mess or mens' mess in any part of the world at any time.

But the seed was sown on fruitful ground. It grew, budded, flowered and seeded again once more to fall on fruitful ground,

There were hard-headed people who scoffed at the story, matter of fact men who dealt in cold, hard figures, which broke no superstitions, men who unhesitatingly would decide to send a ship to sea on a Friday the 13th and remain at a desk to work out the cold profit.

They scoffed at the story. Pointed out that *Charon* was soundly built, well engined, could do 11½ knots at economical steaming. It was true she would have to fill three thousand kit to make a profit, but Ben Christian had said she would do it, he had the skipper for the job, a skipper trained by him, a skipper who disappeared into areas known only to himself and Ben, and returned—at a wireless call—with two thousand kit of prime fish when a starved market needed it most.

There were skippers, intelligent men, young men with ambitions who scoffed loudly in the smoke-rooms and lounges of the hotels they frequented.

"Trawlers are always killing men. It's a hard life and men have to die sometime. Let me have her and I'd make her pay. In five years time I'd have a row of houses in the bank and the

missus would have a wardrobe full of fur coats." This last at the well-dressed women at their sides. "I'd make her pay all right." And this a little louder in case Ben Christian's emissaries were near, enjoying a whisky and soda.

But Ben Christian picked his skippers after trying them for a long time. Not for him the man who talked loudly in an hotel and lay awake in bed wondering if there WAS anything in superstitions. Wondering if the other ships they knew of which had killed a man had lived under an aura of bad luck all the time.

Ben kept an old trawler, an old Aberdeen open-bowed craft with a maximum speed of eight knots, coal capacity for ten days and room for one thousand kit of fish.

When a young, ambitious mate showed yearnings for command, Ben would send for him and would see him at once.

"I'm putting you on *Crescent Moon* as skipper," he would start without preamble. "I'm told the Fleetwood boys are getting a fair haul off Rockall. There's also a tidy living to be made off the Faroes. She'll be iced and coaled up ready for tomorrow morning. Good luck."

The slightly dazed young man would find himself coping with the details with a minor official still not fully aware that he was appointed skipper of Ben Christian's nursery ship. His 'make or break 'em' trawler.

Most of the young men drove themselves and their crews to exhaustion point, got their thousand kit and made a living. Ben expected a small profit from the venture, but what he wanted more was something tangible about the skipper and in some instances got it. He wanted the quality of courage, not the courage which will send a bucking twisting trawler to help another, or will bring a ship slamming through a force nine gale, or through fog at the same speed. Of that animal courage trawler men had in plenty and that Ben knew. He wanted the sort of courage that would take men away from the herd, send them out to gamble on full boxes and a fat wage from an unknown spot, or half empty holds and the next trip starting with the debt of the previous one hanging around their necks.

That sort of courage he found only sometimes and when

he did he nourished it, stood behind the skippers so that they were not afraid to gamble more.

He knew of the stories going around about *Charon*. He had spent some of his life in trawlers. He knew that commonplace matters were debated earnestly and at length on trawler fo'c'sles, knew that they were squeezed dry of any debatable content. He knew that the story of the killing of 'Gimpy' Small would travel slowly, but surely like the threads of dry rot, from ship to ship, from port to port. The men of Aberdeen and Granton, the trawling aristocrats of Hull and Grimsby and Fleetwood, the men of Milford Haven and Swansea would hear the story, would see *Charon* cresting proudly along, a white plume flickering behind from her green and black funnel and would repeat the story.

He felt he had the man to be her skipper who would kill once and for all the story, the man he had in mind for the job as skipper of *Charon* had brains, intelligence, courage. Ben wondered if their sum total arrayed could defeat superstition, godchild of instinct which had flourished before reason was seeded.

Ted Cater was young, he had courage and brains, and allied the two with a strong leavening of intelligence. He could also handle men and get from them the last ounce when they felt that all they had left was a void.

He also had an attractive young wife, shrewd as well as beautiful who was prepared to accept the fact that she had married beneath her social scale—her father being a chief clerk in the local railway office at a steady nine pounds a week with an assured pension at sixty-five of one-third of his income at the time of retiring.

Shrewd because she soon realized that the bronzed young man she met at a dance was not a hard drinking, immoral fisherman who came ashore with fish scales in his hair and spent all his spare time in dockside pubs.

Shrewd because she realized that the fat wallet of notes she once saw was real money and that Ted Cater was in line to earn more.

Shrewd because she realized that with him she would have a reasonable chance of plenty instead of a five-roomed house on a thirty-year mortgage counting the shillings each Thursday which would probably be the case if she married one of the pale clerks in her father's office.

Shrewd because she, too, was a gambler in a cold way and Ted Cater was her gamble.

He gave her the clothes she craved, was proud of her because she showed off well when dressed. In fact they made a handsome couple, he in his shore suits for which he paid at least twice her father's weekly salary, she in well-selected tasteful outfits.

Ted Cater passed his initiation in the ancient *Crescent Moon*, paid his way for three trips then slipped away on the fourth to a little tried deep at the north end of the Dogger. Men had given it up years before as being fished out. Ted did some reasoning, a little research in the technical library in the town, worked out some calculations and estimated that on time elapsed that deep should hold some fish.

He gambled. It did and he came back days before he was expected with a grinning crew and a hold packed hard with best fish to a market starved by a succession of short gales.

Ted still had half his bunkers left, sheer profit for the next trip.

But, best of all, Ben Christian sent for him, sat him in a deep chair in his office and went to the point immediately.

"Why did you try that north deep. It's supposed to have been fished out for twenty years?"

"Why did you wait until the weather threatened to break before trying it? Why did you not work a few hauls first to ensure working expenses then gamble on the deep?"

Ben sat back impassive and listened.

As Ted Cater explained that he estimated that sufficient time had elapsed from the ruthless over trawling of the deep for the food to gather again, time enough for the fish to re-establish themselves. He listened as Ted explained his gamble with the weather. If the trawl had come up empty there was still time enough for him to dodge down to the grounds and make his living, resting his men as they dodged down.

If, on the other hand, the trawl came up full they could fill a hold, steam easily homeward and catch the weather-starved market.

His gamble came off and firm eyed he sat across from Christian returning level gaze for gaze.

As Cater talked so Ben made up his mind. Here was a man to back.

At the end Christian stood up.

"Right. I'm transferring you to *Andromeda*. Do you know the Bear Island area? Take her out when she comes out of dry dock on Thursday morning. She'll coal and ice up and sail in the afternoon. Let me know who you would like with you as mate."

Ben Christian was pleased because he had found what he wanted. A skipper with youth, brain, courage and intelligence.

Ted Cater was pleased because *Andromeda* was almost a new ship, well equipped, was considered one of the aristocrats of the port.

And Mrs. Cater was pleased because *Andromeda* filled to 2,500 boxes of fish and on a rising market would mean real solid money for a successful skipper.

Furthermore *Andromeda* was fitted with short-wave telephony and although she could not answer, with a short-wave set she would hear Ted's voice most nights when he was at sea.

It all worked out that way, like a neatly solved jig-saw puzzle, Ben's judgement was proved to be correct. Ted made the trawler pay handsomely and Mrs. Cater allowed her fingers to caress a new and sleekly expensive fur coat.

CHAPTER III

BEN CHRISTIAN was standing by the broad window of his office when Ted Cater was announced. From that window Christian could look down the length of the fish dock and see much which brought a sense of pride to him.

In the serried rows of trawlers lying alongside the quays he could see a number with the green and black funnel of his company. There were as many again at sea, all well built and well found ships. And all from a tattered and dog-eared old *Manual of Seamanship* or, if one wanted to delve back into origins because his uncle had lost his last battle with the sea, even further back than that because his father had been a fisherman and it was in his blood. His destiny.

But his mind was not on such matters as he stared from the window. He was looking at a ship which stood alone. Against some of the others, rusted and slightly battered, she shone in her pristine glory of new paint. The raking broad funnel set behind the squat raking bridge seemed to emphasize the flaring bow and powerful lines flowing from the towering forecastle.

Charon was complete, coaled and iced, stored and equipped she was practically ready for sea and still, by a grimly humorous quirk of Christian's character she was still an enigma to the port.

Nobody except Ben Christian knew who was to be her skipper. Contrary to usual custom her skipper had not taken part in full engine and anchor trials, neither had he watched the first runs of the big winch or checked the run of the trawl leads.

Ben had done all those things himself.

Some said this and others said that. Late in the nights, just before closing time, when imagination, fed by copious drinks, had flared expansively men had even conjectured that Ben Christian was going to skipper her himself and was going to set an all high record for lesser men to shoot at.

All knew that in addition to the almost sumptuous accommodation fitted for the skipper, with full-sized shower-equipped bathroom, there was another room adjacent equally well equipped. Whoever skippered her could look forward to an important passenger occasionally.

The port narrowed the possibilities down to three, in its more sober moments, and of those three men all of them secretly hoped, but kept their own counsel except in the secrecy of their bedchambers wherein men have no secrets—or if they do they keep them for only a short time.

He knew that Nobby Clarke, garrulous cockney, deep-sea sailor turned trawlerman turned his short spells ashore into one long drunk. He knew that for the first two days at sea Clarke would be a snarling tyrant until on the night of the third day he would bring out his beloved piano accordion and coax from it soul mellowing tunes.

On the fishing grounds Clarke was worth two men and it was on that which Cater assessed men.

The chief engineer, taciturn Barney Clay, a Tynesider almost born in an engine room, could wheedle an extra knot when builders and general experience would say a ship was doing her maximum. Moreover he could do it on less coal than any other man. An important point when viewed against expenses for the trip.

And the rest of the crew were to those standards. Least but not unimportant in his selection was Fudge, the cook. None but a few in the office and Ted Cater knew that the thin, wizened toothless old man was fully named Theophilus Prentice, had once been a chef in a large restaurant and had behind him many years of futile fighting and smashed knuckles caused by his name.

Fudge he became and as Fudge he was famed as the best trawler cook from the Dogger to the White Sea.

So *Charon* sailed, brave in her gleaming black hull, light buff upper works, short squat funnel painted green and black.

Rusty crabbers bound south and west from the top end of the over-fished Dogger watched her pass with envy in the souls of them.

The small trawlers of Aberdeen, rust flaked and a jump ahead of a loss on their trip shared the envy.

"Losh, yon's like a bluidy dreadnought," from the bridge of one ancient plodder summed it up.

Charon snored on at a trifle over eleven knots. "And at 120 revs. I've a fair bit in hand," the chief revelled as he mopped his face. "A fair bit indeed."

She passed homeward bounders from Bear Island, curtsied gracefully to them, a wisp of steam, whipped back from the whistle was added as Cater audibly recognized a friend.

"A gran' ship . . . but . . ."

Not knowing, or if knowing not caring, *Charon's* flaring bow slipped through the water, up through the fiords, passing a few German trawlers, making their skipper's mouth round into a surprised 'Oh'.

The passengers on a coastwise ship through the fiords crowded to the rail to watch her pass, new red ensign whipping in a crackle on her stern.

The harassed officers on a timber ship from Hammerfest peered over their towering deck cargo of virgin white timbers, admired and envied. Admired her buoyant balanced thrust at the swell, envied her the deck-room she had and returned to worrying over the weather to face them and their cumbersome load.

North Cape dropped astern as the weary grey rearguard of daylight retreated before the massed forces of the night. Ted Cater, thick sweater high around his neck tapped the barometer sharply, mentally assessed it's message, added it to the most recent weather forecast and nodded serenely. From that he turned to the new and unstained chart, ran his parallel rule along it, rolled it over to the compass rose and decided on a course.

In the dim wheel-house Nobby Clarke stood with a glowing cigarette hanging from his lips.

"Now't to worry about in the way of weather, Nobby. How's y'head?"

Nobby smiled, shifted the cigarette to the corner of his mouth.

"Not too bad, if you mean my head," he chuckled. "North 10 East if you mean the ship's."

The deck-hand at the wheel joined in the laugh which continued when Cater answered. "I knew your head was better. I could hear you murdering 'Sweet Adeline' on your squeeze box a while back. Make it North 22 East. Nip along and have a look at the log," he added taking over the wheel from the deck-hand.

As the man left Cater leaned gracefully against the wheel spindle cover.

"Last trip, on *Andromeda*, I tried a couple of hauls away to the west of where we generally go. I found a short bank with

not more than 300 fathoms and shelving at that. Fish were forty fathoms thick there. Prime stuff. That's where I'm aiming for now."

"Huh." Nobby's answer, non committal was accepted as full agreement.

"With this crowd we'll shoot and haul until we fill up. We'll be on our way home with three thousand kit in next to no time."

"Huh huh."

Ted Cater accepted the log legend, scribbled it down and noted the time. Then he leaned against the front of the wheel staring into the black of the night with that apparently unseeing stare of the sailor on watch, a stare which gazes out at nothing but sees all.

"Give me a call around seven o'clock," Cater said eventually and returned to his room. After scrutinizing the chart once again he took off his jersey and kicked his slippers under the table. He took one last glimpse at the tell-tale compass in the ceiling over his head, listening to the steady throb of the engines and lay down on the wide settee.

Charon snored on through the night and into a large part of the next day.

Ted Cater spent the whole of the waning afternoon on the bridge scanning the pencil line grey horizon for a wisp of smoke.

"If we see anybody it will be them German's. They often work out west for a look see. I've heard tell they are backed against a loss by the owners on those look-see trips." As Cater spoke he kept his binoculars glued to his eyes for yet another sweep.

"Looks all clear to me," he said finally. He lit a cigarette, drew at it pensively and intermittently chewed his bottom lip as he ranged fact against conjecture and submitted them both to the supreme judges Experience and Reason.

He turned and shot the cigarette over the side, watched its curve until it disappeared into the creaming sea.

"I'll start to run a line of soundings before midnight, drop a dan and come daylight we'll shoot," he said finally. "Gimme a

call around eleven o'clock. Earlier than that if you hit around 300 fathoms."

Just before midnight, with his fathometer glowing grey-green behind him Cater started his search, groping at first like a blind man stretching out for a kerb he knows is near. From log reading to a back check of his course. From a shrewd estimate of wind to an equally shrewd estimate of how much the hand at the wheel had allowed her to wander he gathered a trifle here, a fragment there. A glance at the depth-recording machine added to his growing fund. He looked at the clock and clicked impatiently.

Almost synchronizing with the touch of midnight the man at the wheel said, "Showing 290 now, Skipper."

Cater watched the machine for a moment.

"Come around to North 40 West."

He made a pencil mark on the chart and noted the time. Presently he altered again, and again, each alteration brought a growing sense of satisfaction. Finally he took over the wheel himself.

"Tell Nobby we'll drop the dan now," he said brusquely. The man slipped from the wheel-house to deliver his message.

While the man was absent Cater ruminated. Over nearly a 1,000 miles of monotonous ocean, grey and featureless, each full-bellied swell a twin to the others, he had found his bank.

Had he explained to a layman he would have shown how he had searched for and found a hill-top under the sea. Not a conical hill-top, but a long, regular ridge which rising from the depths, dropped again slightly then rose to a steady, flat plateau. He had steamed its length, assessed the direction of the shallow valley and it was along it he intended to fish, along it where food for the fish had accumulated as its low banks had trapped it and isolated it from the current.

First he dropped a dan buoy, steel cylinder flag-topped marker, well away from his proposed fishing area, in fact well over to the deep shelving depth so that if any curious trawler came along and was inclined to take a gamble it would sound deep water or would shoot over a bare bank.

Almost as soon as the first hint of grey crept into the black

sky the telegraph bell jangled for the first time after leaving port, the bow wave died away to a faint wisp of white and the trawl, 120 feet of tan net with its iron-shod wooden boards shot over the side, disappeared into the depths. *Charon* had started work.

After nearly two hours of slow steaming Cater decided to haul. He did not expect a full trawl, what he wanted to see was some confirmation of his theory.

"Whip it in," he said laconically over the front of the bridge and he leaned on the wing watching the dripping, straining wire slowly crawl through the sheaves and on to the powerful winch just in front of the bridge.

Suddenly the winch clattered madly until the man controlling it shut the valve, but he was too late, the damage was done. The frayed, short length of wire rope slashed through the air like a gigantic striking snake, clanged sharply as it struck a stanchion and the lethal, jagged strands laid two men bleeding and broken on the deck.

In a few short seconds the operation had changed from an exploratory haul to a minor disaster. The new wire had parted not more than a ship's length away. The expensive trawl, plus its haul, plus 300 fathoms of wire was slowly sinking to the bottom of the sea. On the deck were two men bleeding and senseless.

"Keep your eye skinned. If it's full it might come up on t'starboard side," Cater said tersely to one of the deck-hands. Even in this crisis he kept his head. He knew that if the trawl was full of fish the enormous buoyancy of the air in their lungs would bring the trawl surging to the surface if the wire was not broken too deeply down.

One look at the injured men was enough for Cater.

"Ribs busted and cuts a fathom deep on Pollack and Rawlings' thigh is laid open to the bone. Bring 'em along to my berth. Nobby, take t'bridge."

By the time the injured men had been tenderly carried to Cater's berth he had out and ready open on the table the modest medical chest supplied to trawlers and was thumbing his way through the simplified and dogmatic instructions tabulated in the first-aid manual.

At the end of an hour he stood up from his primitive surgery, wiped his hands on a towel and shook his head.

"Rawlings will do, but t'sooner I get Pollack to a doctor the better. He's got more'n busted ribs."

He looked at the tell-tale compass over his head, shut one eye and rasped a hand over an unshaven chin.

"Tell Nobby to put her around to North 70 West and crack on all the speed we've got."

The deck-hand who had been his trembling assistant clattered through the door and up to the bridge. As Cater turned to his radio cabinet he heard the telegraph bell jangle and felt *Charon* begin to throb.

Two courses were open to him. He could steer southerly for a Norwegian port, or a slightly longer one for Iceland. Cater had made up his mind within seconds of a more detailed examination of the more seriously injured of the seamen.

Some deeper instinct had told him that not even if his ship could steam twenty-two knots, never mind twelve would he be in time for any earthly aid for the man. But he had to race and chance it. By steaming to Iceland for medical aid he would be able to start trawling again on well-tried fishing grounds within an hour or two of the men being landed. Not superlative grounds it is true, such as he was on now, but an area where he could at least show some return for his trawling.

If, on the other hand he steamed for Norway he would have at least thirty hours steaming again before he would shoot his trawl.

Everything was subordinate to fishing. Well and truly had Ben Christian judged his man.

Cater finished his informative signal to the authorities in Iceland, gave his estimated time of arrival, and sent a shorter message to his owners.

As he turned from the radio cabinet he stood looking at the two bandaged men for a moment or two. Then he breathed sharply outwards through his nose and shook his head slowly.

"What's she making?" he asked later on the bridge.

"Shade over twelve and t'chief says he can keep it up. Might

even manage another half later. He had just cleaned fires when I rang down."

Cater nodded at Nobby's information, selected and lit a cigarette and leaned on the ledge under the wheel-house window.

After a period of silence he turned. "Have a look at that wire. It shouldn't have parted at that depth. We were sixty fathom or more off the bottom. A brand new wire parting like that. . . ." He clicked his teeth in conclusion.

Nobby Clarke nodded slowly in sympathy. "Takes the cream off the trip. Trawl, boards, everything gone first crack out of the bag. Who in hell is the jinx?"

Cater wheeled sharply. "There is no jinx. It's the luck of the game, and you know it. Haven't you ever lost a trawl before?"

Nobby's eyes opened widely. Cater's vehemence surprised him. "Course I've lost a trawl before, more than one. Generally because it's been caught up, or a wire's been a bit old, but. . . ."

"Now you seen one go with a brand new wire and it wasn't caught up, but it's still the luck of the game."

As *Charon* slammed away leaving behind her a creaming wake the never sleeping radio station at Wick came on with relayed surgical advice. After quickly digesting this Cater checked back on the steps he had taken and nodded his head in brief approval over his treatment of the seaman Rawlings. Although the wound was deep and extensive he knew that no vital artery had been severed and it was merely a question of keeping away infection and letting time and the man's youthful and rugged health do the rest.

But over Pollack he shook his head. The damage was inside. The comparatively superficial wounds showing were not enough to reduce the man to a scarcely breathing grey inanimate figure. Somewhere inside the chest cavity the blow had done some serious damage.

A thin smile flickered briefly over Cater's face as he read the line, "If patient is conscious give him ice to suck if it is available. . . ."

'And us with tons of it aboard,' he thought. 'Anyway he's not conscious and that's that.'

The south-eastern headlands of Iceland loomed ahead through the grey-black morning murk as Pollack died. At least it was then that Cater found he was dead. He stooped over the man and saw what looked like a faint shadow slipping quickly across the injured seaman's face and bent closer to examine him.

He could no longer detect even the faint rise and fall of the man's chest or the almost imperceptible quiver of the soft inner part of the top lip.

Gently Cater covered the man's face with the top fold of the blanket and stood looking down at him.

From the tumult of thoughts chasing themselves through his mind one remained clanging away like a distant but constant and imperious bell.

"First trip and she kills one." He shook his head swiftly. "Hell, I'm as bad as Nobby. As bad as the deck-hands. It was bad luck and no more."

He climbed to the bridge, glanced quickly at the compass, stared fixedly at the dark mass of land looming up ahead then turned to the second hand standing near the wheel. Clarke had a large mug of steaming tea in his hand and it was half-way to his lips as Cater spoke.

"Pollack's gone."

The mug remained poised. Clarke's head did not move but his eyes swivelled around to meet Cater's.

"Go on, say it. SAY IT, damn you." There was rising note of ill-curbed temper in Cater's voice.

Slowly the mug travelled up to Clarke's mouth. He drank deeply and noisily, slightly cooling the hot liquid as he sucked it in. The mug dropped away to its former level as he said non-committally, "Be in in say, three hours. We've whacked along at a steady twelve all the way."

Cater nodded brief agreement. Behind him he heard the contents of the mug receiving more attention. He waited for the next question knowing it would come. It came embodied in one word.

"Rawlings?"

"He'll do. In a lot of pain, but he'll make it all right."

Cater heard the Second Hand stir and heard the sound of the heavy mug being put down on a shelf.

"Go'n get the skipper a mug full. Let your hand shake when you wallop in the sugar."

The silent seaman handed over the wheel and clattered away to obey.

Cater rested his arms wearily on the ledge in front of him and stared out over the leaden-hued sea. What a string of circumstances. What a long list of 'ifs' there were threaded on that string. If the wire had broken only a few feet deeper the sea would have taken the first impact and it would have snaked aboard docile and harmless. If the man on the winch had been standing with his hand on the valve instead of looking out astern he could have reduced the lethal whip to no more than a painful rap. If Rawlings and Pollack had not been standing near the gallows when it slashed back. . . . If. . . . If. . . .

It seemed as if Clarke had been following the skipper's trend of thought.

"What in hell made that wire part like that?"

Cater shook his head without turning round. He recognized it as an opening gambit from Clarke not a question requiring an answer.

"I've looked at it a dozen times," Clarke went on. "There's not a mark on it, not a fray anywhere. A clean break, as clean as a cut. And why there?"

For a few moments they maintained a silence which was broken again by Clarke.

"It was a clean shoot, fair out on the quarter all the time. Not a chance of its having got across the screw." He shook his head, completely puzzled.

Cater smiled thinly at the last statement. Wires had been cut in the past, and would be in the future by a ship's stern riding across the line of trawl either through carelessness at the wheel or a nasty quartering sea making the ship slow steaming, as it would be when trawling, difficult to handle.

But *Charon's* first shot was made in a flat calm and Cater brooked no carelessness anywhere on his ships.

The seaman's feet clattered on the iron-runged ladder outside and he stumbled in with the mug of tea.

Clarke glanced at it as the seaman put it down. "Gawd blimey, you bin drinking it or something. The perishing mug's half empty."

The seaman shuffled his feet and looked alternatively at the deck and out of the wheel-house window.

"No . . . I . . . I . . . stumbled, I spilt a drop. . . ."

"Spilt a drop, you bin washing the bleeding deck with it. It's only half full . . . what. . . ."

Cater cut in wearily. "It'll do. There's enough. It's wet and warm. . . ."

Clarke looked at him keenly. That from skipper Cater, who in his lighter moments was wont to brag that he drank more tea, and hotter tea than any skipper fishing north of Flamborough Head, was breath-taking.

But Skipper Cater knew why the tea had been spilled, and spilled by a seaman who would normally carry a mug of tea along a twisting heaving deck in two-thirds of a gale and would not lose a spoonful. He knew that the youngster had to pass the door to his room. He knew that what lay on the floor in that darkened room, just behind the gay coloured curtain, had sent the youngster scurrying down to the galley with a fearful look cast over his shoulder and had brought him stumbling hurriedly past the door with the laden mug.

As he drank he looked steadily at the young deck-hand and strangely the youngster drew comfort from the level grey eyes.

"Its wet and warm," Cater said briefly.

CHAPTER IV

CATER completed some complicated mental arithmetic as he lay on his back in his bunk with his hands behind his head.

A few hours before he had been in touch with Christian on

the radio telephone and from the simple code employed knew that he would arrive back to catch a good market.

It had not been a record-breaking trip. The bank upon which he had adventured had been patchy. Sometimes it surrendered a bulging cod end full of prime fish, at others it scornfully gave up a meagre toll of stuff fit only for the offal factory.

Nevertheless Cater knew that somewhere in the vicinity was the extensive pocket of fish he wanted. Ultimately he had filled his quota after grim, hard trawling and with the three thousand boxes safely battened down he knew that his trip would show a profit for both owners and himself.

Not the profit he had wanted it to show. But enough. He had used up four days in his steaming in with the dead and injured men. Nearly two days to get there, and nearly two on the return journey. And they had spent a few hours at anchor while the few last grim rites were formed for Pollack.

Some of the hands, strangely clean, shaved and in their shoregoing clothes had gone ashore to troop behind the plain coffin, first to the modest wooden church where a Danish pastor had intoned through the service sometimes breaking into broken English. Then on to the bleak, wind-swept cemetery on the side of a hill where lay many men of many nationalities whose bodies had been scornfully tossed ashore by a sated sea.

Cater had completed the few formalities with the brisk British consul and had sailed into a purple-black dusk. Although he would not have recognized the phrase if it had been quoted to him it was 'let the dead bury the dead'. Pollack slept alone beneath the new earth mound. *Charon* had to make a living for the living.

Soon, absorbed in the exhausting task of shooting and hauling, gutting and packing, the death of Pollack, his burial, the broken wire and the lost four days receded into the over-all pattern which was their life. A bad rip from a knife-edged fish-bone—an almost daily occupational risk remained clear sharp for a few hours. Then, when the two thousand boxes were filled there was the objective before them constantly clear.

"Fill her up and away we go."

And the morning came when Cater said, "That's the lot, Nobby. Put the lid on it."

The crew relaxed, adjusting themselves to the almost somnolent routine of a homeward passage. Hands would do a short two-hour trick at the wheel, rouse themselves to dispose of enormous meals, argue a little over trivialities, show momentary interest as they passed outward-bound trawlers, discuss them in desultory phrases, play an odd game or two of cards, but in the main they would sleep restoring the exhausted muscles.

The mental arithmetic slipping through Cater's mind assured him that he would show a profit despite the lost four days and the lost and expensive gear. But for those two factors he would have been near the high flighted target at which he aimed.

The mathematical mood remained and switched to currents, tides, depths and courses in particular over the long undersea valley along which he had trawled.

Already Cater was planning his attack for the next trip. Against hard knowledge gained from full and empty trawls he ranged theory and from them arrived at a total the sum of which was unless somebody else discovered the place, and that was unlikely, he could afford to make two or three trips there eventually striking the pocket which would enable him to fill up and be back with a record catch in record time with a minimum of expenditure.

"Unless. . . ." Like a gush of water through an hitherto ignored leak it surged into mind. "Unless another trawl parted . . . unless . . . Pollack. . . ." The thoughts had no time to orient themselves in his mind before he sat upright in his bunk.

"Damn," Cater exploded. "I'm getting near as bad as the hands."

He reached for and lit a cigarette and for a few moments he sat on the edge of the bunk rolling the dead matchstick slowly between his fingers. Finally he climbed out and slid his feet into the leather slippers which he always wore in fine weather. From a hook near the head of the bunk he took down his coat,

helped himself to a new packet of cigarettes and matches and went up to the wheel-house.

Nobby gave him a brief nod and concentrated on his almost inevitable mug of tea.

"A few hours more and I'll have something stronger than tea in me hands," Clarke said after a brief interval. He pursued the theme with a light almost amounting to excitement in his eyes. "Me and a foreman rigger are going to take a bus out to Kale. We aim to get out there about six o'clock, have a couple or so in the Coach and Horses, go on to The King's Head—there's music in that pub. Then we reckon to have a couple each in The Last Mile and finish up at that classy pub by the bus stop, The Hollybush."

Nobby watched Cater through narrowed eyes and waited for an answer. He was a crude, but shrewd psychologist. He knew he had but to mention a prolonged pub crawl to provoke a long lecture from Cater.

Finally the answer came.

"So you say now. So you've been saying for the past half dozen trips. You'll get as far as the King's Head, you'll either meet some trawlermen and start arguing fishing, or you'll get into a fight and win, lose or wrangle, you'll get an immediate thick ear, and have a thick head tomorrow."

Nobby smiled thinly. The hare he had started was following a well-defined course. The next laps should include a brief reference to saving at least some of his hard earned money and should touch on the value of putting in some time at the school maintained by the trawler owners for prospective skippers. It should then wind up pontifically that there was only one job worth while on a trawler; only one job worth going to sea for and that was skipper with all its responsibilities and all its plums.

Cater shocked Nobby by a violent departure from the accustomed track. He reached out, took the second hand's almost revered mug, took a generous gulp and handed the mug back.

Unsmilingly he said, "Earn it like a horse, spend it like an ass." Cater turned and stared out from the bridge window leaving an outraged Nobby Clarke to contemplate his back.

How long ago was it somebody had quoted that phrase to him? Cater allowed his thoughts to slip back a few years. He was between fourteen and fifteen years old, safely embedded in the fourth form of the grammar school to which he had gone via an easily obtained scholarship.

His father, a solid, hard-fishing skipper, by dint of many years saving owned a half-share in and skippered an inshore crabber. An ancient, weather-scarred ship which never went more than fifty miles from port and once a week returned with a fair catch, a living and a bit over. Cater saw little of him but the solid man had a lot to do in guiding his destiny.

Cater's contemporaries were going off to sea, returning with scarred fingers, wind and sun whipped tanned faces, perpetually wore blue jerseys, smoked, ogled the girls and had money in their pockets. They were men in his eyes—albeit they were often tearful and frightened decky learners at sea.

What point was there in his staying at school, he argued. He intended to go to sea, he meant to go fishing so why waste time sitting in a form-room learning geometry, algebra and stuff like that.

Cater remembered his father sitting back in his high-backed chair, his slippered feet on an old green felt hassock. He remembered him pursing his lips, tamping the glowing cone on the top of his pipe back into the confines of the bowl. He remembered the devastating argument his father finally produced.

"Of course you'll go to sea, go fishing like I did, and my father before me. It's in the blood and what's in the blood will come out. But . . ." the pipe received some more attention. "There's only one job worthwhile on a trawler and that's skipper. Your pal Benjy Palmer, and that other lad, whats-his-name . . . Lawler get what . . . thirty bob, maybe two quid a week as decky learners now, in a couple of years time they'll raise to three or four quid and . . ." his father had leaned forward impressively, "and in ten years time they'll still be deck-hands on four quid a week. They'll earn it like horses and spend it like asses. No, me lad. I had to learn things for my tickets homeward bound with every bone in my body aching. You

ain't. You'll do your learning NOW. The rest will come easy."

And so it came to pass, with a benevolent fate taking more than a fragmentary part in the proceedings.

Ben Christian had wanted a cheap, but good crabber. A deal was struck between old man Cater and Christian with a shake of the hand at the quayside. Young Ted, within a month or two of leaving school was with his father.

Christian had turned to the boy seeing a muscular lithe youngster showing more than a promise of the man to be.

"And what are you going to do with your life?" Christian asked him. It was an idle inquiry more intended to make a little conversation than any search for information.

"Go fishing," young Ted had replied crisply. "Two years decky learner, then decky, sit for my second hand's ticket, then my skipper's because . . ." he looked up at his father, saw encouragement and raced on . . . "being skipper is the only job worth while on a trawler."

Christian's eyes had widened. Over the boy's head his eyes met old man Cater's. The old man nodded. "That's the way he wants it. That's the way it will be," he said.

And that's the way it was. Christian let him sail on his trawlers, watched his career, kept an eye on him when he was a second hand, gave him a trial on his oldest trawler as skipper.

And old man Cater, putting in most of his time sitting in his high-backed chair lived to see his son become one of Christian's top skippers, earning good money, neither earning it like a horse, not spending it like an ass.

"Is that the Knuckle Buoy fine on the port bow?"

Clarke's voice broke in on his reverie and Cater lifted the binoculars to identify the buoy.

"That's it."

"Thirty miles to go and the humpers can have all of her till next trip." Clarke grunted. He paused for a moment or two. "Going to try that bank again next trip, skipper?"

Cater turned and met his eyes.

"I am, and the trip after that." Tones were level flat, inviting no argument.

Clarke nodded his head briefly.

"They must be fifty fathom thick around there somewhere. That last haul was the real McCoy. Not a dog in a ton," referring to the term for low-grade fish, especially dog-fish.

"That's why I'm going back there," Cater answered. "Knock her back a couple of knots at the Knuckle. We're away ahead of tide. Thirty miles to go." He turned to Clarke with a thin smile. "Counting the eight miles by bus, it's thirty-eight miles to the Coach and Horses. Bet you a level half-quid you don't get to the Last Mile and I'll give you two to one in quids you don't reach The Hollybush."

Clarke's eyebrows arched up.

"You're on. Both bets. Easy money."

Cater shook his head. "Fairly giving it away, aren't you? Want to have another bet that you don't get into a fight?"

Indignation shook Nobby. "What the hell. I go ashore to enjoy myself. If people will pick on me . . . like that last time. There was that big Grimsby decky shooting off his mouth. . . ."

"Grimsby, Fleetwood, or anywhere else. It doesn't matter where they come from. You'll get into a fight. Any bet?"

Clarke shook his head and Cater turned to the door. As he reached it he said, "Betting on a cert. that would be. Don't forget, knock her back a couple of knots at the Knuckle and gimme a call when we reach the North Ridge light."

"Aye aye."

Nobby muttered away indignantly as he was left alone in the wheel-house with only a dozing deck-hand at the wheel.

Cater felt no trepidation as he walked through the outer office towards Christian's room although he intercepted an odd glance or two from some of the staff.

"Good afternoon, Skipper. Mr. Christian will see you right away." The brisk, efficient, good-looking girl smiled a brief welcome and pressed a button leaning forward to speak into a house telephone.

"... per Cater to see you, Mr. Christian. Right away? I'll show him in."

As Cater smiled his thanks and passed her she murmured, "Barometer rising. But recent squalls."

Cater chuckled. It was a little game she played with those skippers she liked. Quite often it enabled them to set a course before entering Christian's room. If she murmured, "Glass dropping. Heavy weather ahead," it gave a man time to adjust himself to the storm which would shortly break in the room.

"Come in, Ted. I can't give you long. I've an important appointment, but give me the details."

He nodded briefly once or twice as Cater sketched over the outstanding events of the trip but made no comment. When Cater finished Christian leaned back in his chair with his elbows on the arms and his fingertips touching.

"You had no bad weather, of course, but in general how did she go?"

The ship before the man. Not a question about the lost trawl or the wire which had killed one man and badly injured another. They would follow later. But first, The Ship.

Cater rested his hands on his thighs and leaned forward slightly.

"Like a bird. We had a bit of a blow, nothing much, but enough to show me that the cruiser stern and balanced rudder will hold her up like a ballet dancer."

Christian nodded. "That's what I hoped to hear. We'll know more when she's been through a big blow. What's she like down below?"

"Tiptop. We logged a steady twelve when I was taking the two men in and wasn't heavy on coal. And the chief says he still had a bit in hand."

"Good enough. The next one will be an oil burner. I might even switch *Charon* to oil." He rubbed his chin for a moment or two then went on, "Are you R.N.R. Ted? You are. Hm hm. Then the Admiralty have an interest in both of you. Some of the ready cash for *Charon* came from the Admiralty, but keep that under your hat."

The two men sat silent for a while until Christian broke it.

"Bad luck about Pollack and Rawlings. Rawlings will be

coming down in a week. He's getting on all right. The hospital report says you did the right thing at the right moment and the infection was kept to a minimum."

Cater smiled briefly.

Christian stood up, looked at his watch and held out his hand. "Eleven o'clock tomorrow morning, Ted. I can give you the rest of the morning for full details. Land that wire, I want it examined scientifically."

That was all. No conjectures, no guesses. Something had gone wrong, let the right men investigate then place the blame firmly where it belonged.

Cater signalled to a taxi outside the dock gates, tossed a grey and stained sea-bag alongside the driver and gave him his address.

"Stop off at the Hillside laundry," he said briefly and leaned back.

At the laundry Ted Cater deposited his bag with the pert young girl at the counter and ascertained that a similar one would be waiting for him in three days time when he would be ready to sail again.

He was following a custom he had established before he was married and carried on after that ceremony.

He kept two complete outfits of the heavy woollen underwear trawlermen found so necessary. Each outfit had a couple of changes and included a thick jersey knitted by hand by the women in Shetland.

Pearl, Cater's wife, never saw his sea-going clothes other than the double-breasted blue serge suit he used solely to journey from the ship to his home and from home to ship.

Only once had she raised the point and Ted had cleared it up in a few short sentences.

"I've been looking after myself for years," he explained. "All those things smell of fish. It can't be helped, but there's no reason for you to have anything to do with it—except the money that comes from it," he concluded with a grin. "So, I'll go on dumping a bag at the laundry when I get in and pick up my other clean set when I go on board. See?"

She did and appreciated it and never had the experience

of many trawlermen's wives of coping with sweat and fish-slime soaked heavy underclothes in sometimes desperate endeavours to get them ready by sailing day.

Immediately he arrived home at the trim detached house in the suburbs Cater would shed his functional blue serge suit and would select from his fairly extensive wardrobe a suit of exclusive and expensive cut, a suit which would not have disgraced Saville Row either in design or price.

His three days or so home were carefully planned to absorb as much enjoyment as he and his wife could pack into them.

Sometimes they would go off in their two seater into the country and would wind up at a roadside hotel for dinner and a dance, or would visit the small but progressive repertory theatre.

Occasionally, but not if Cater could avoid it, they would visit her people. Although they tried their best to conceal it her parents, influenced by an outmoded snobbery, had never reconciled themselves completely to her marriage. They were of the upper part of the town, the dwellers on the hill and Cater was a docksider. The barrier had been erected hundreds of years, when perhaps there was some justification, and had never been demolished.

Ted's unforgiving minute rested on one Christmas visit—one of his rare Christmases at home—when she had prevailed upon him to attend a Christmas party given by her parents.

Ted's unforgiving minute came as he was sitting quietly in a corner nursing a drink and watching with mild amusement the efforts of two or three anaemic clerks who were flirting with his wife.

The thought occurred to him that he would like to see those would-be Casanovas battling with a 120-foot sodden trawl with a freezing wind numbing the arms and water sloshing around their waists.

Then a fragment of conversation percolated through his thoughts. Two jaded women sitting near him were discussing Pearl, and Cater could not help but hear them.

"... a great disappointment, a great disappointment indeed

to her poor mother. They hoped she would have Leonard—he's in the Rates Department—but she married some fisherman. Quite a mad thing to do. . . ."

"Her mother was in a terrible to-do yesterday. It seems he was home from sea and Pearl was bringing him along. . . ."

"He doesn't seem to have turned up, such a relief for. . . ."

Ted's face had flushed. He fought momentarily for self-control, looked carefully at his well-cared-for hands, then stood up and turned to the two women.

"May I get you a drink. I see you are without," he said levelly.

The two women smiled and surrendered their glasses which Ted replenished and returned before moving over to the piano where Pearl was coping admirably with the simpering admirers.

"Hullo, darling, having fun?" he said.

Pearl gave his face a swift scrutiny vaguely detecting something untoward. She moved away from the group and stood looking up into his face.

"Anything wrong?"

"No, but I think I ought to meet some of the people here. We'll get around to those sheiks by and by, but. . . ."

Pearl smiled. "Jealous?"

His eyes twinkled momentarily. "It would take a MAN to make me jealous. But you are having fun with the boys, introduce me to some of the girls." He heavily accented the word 'girls'.

Pearl passed the tip of her tongue around her upper lip for a moment, then smiled. Something was afoot. She knew not what.

"Now, those two ladies sitting over there. I've been by them for half an hour. I've got them a drink but we don't know each other."

Pearl raised an eyebrow quizzically. What was the man up to? But she took him across the room and presented him.

"Oh, Mrs. Barker, Mrs. Kemp, I would like to introduce my husband."

Ted's eyes had remained fixed on their faces and he wickedly enjoyed their unbounded confusion.

"The trawlerman, you know," he drawled. "I'm having one of my rare at home Christmases."

They were in bed that night before he explained to Pearl and after a moment or two of indignation she had rocked with laughter.

"You handled that far better than I could have," she said finally then turned toward him slipping her arm behind his head. "Whatever they may think, you are the man I want . . . and the man I have and intend to hold."

She felt him stir, his powerful arm stole round behind her back and she had squirmed in expectation.

But, from then onwards Ted kept joint visits to her parents to a minimum.

As the taxi trundled towards his home it passed a bus which had the legend The Hollybush on the rear route identification panel and Cater smiled. He leaned forward to look into it on the unlikely chance that Nobby had beaten all his previous records for getting ready for the shore and had caught it.

It was a faint hope because he knew that despite his dogmatic planning Nobby and his drinking companion would sample the beer at several of the town public houses before embarking on wider travels.

Cater and Clarke had been deep friends and shipmates for two or three years with but brief intervals of interruptions.

He had first met Nobby when he was skipper of an older trawler and Nobby Clarke had been the doyen of the deck-hands. He had acquired a reputation as a trouble maker because he had been involved in two or three fights both ashore and afloat.

Cater had found Nobby painfully struggling through a Board of Trade guide to skippers and second hands and had helped him. In fact he had kept Nobby's nose to the grindstone, had forced him to spend a trip or two ashore at the crude but effective cramming school and to the intense surprise of nobody more than Nobby Clarke he had passed out successfully.

From that to sailing almost continually with Cater as second hand was but a step.

He discovered that Nobby's extreme irascibility never lasted longer than the second day at sea, and closed his eyes to it weighing it against his undoubted over-all ability to work like a slave and to get the deck-hands to do the same.

Such thoughts were idly passing through his mind when the taxi turned off the tree-lined main road, climbed a short rise and swung into the avenue of neat, semi-detached houses one of which was his home.

His wife had been accurately posted over the telephone of the time of *Charon's* arrival and knew to within half an hour what time he would be home and she was waiting for him with a glad smile, neat, cool and attractive.

They decided on an evening by their own fireside and later with only a soft glow from a standard lamp and subdued music coming from the radio she watched him under lowered lids.

"Something on your mind, Ted?"

She had heard the story of the death of Pollack and the injury to the other man. The bare details had been known to her for some time from a paragraph in the local paper. Now she had heard it amplified by him. She knew her husband well enough, had accurately assessed the temper of his metal to know that such accidents would not cause him either deep worry or sleepless nights.

He was hard, without being brittle, firm without being either heartless or brutal, he was capable of putting the accidents well into the back recesses of his mind and practically forgetting them except for any lesson to be learned from them.

He stirred in his chair at her question, looked up, smiled at her, lit a cigarette, passed it to her and started another for himself.

"Are you superstitious—or, let me put it this way, do you believe in superstitions?"

She gave him a long, level glance before answering, trying to detect some clue on his line of thoughts.

"N-no, not unduly. Why do you ask?"

"Do you pass under ladders, throw salt over your shoulder if you spill it and that sort of stuff?"

"If there's anybody painting on it I pass outside a ladder, other-

wise. . . ." She raised her eyebrows quizzingly. "What's all this leading to?"

Cater sat forward with his left palm flat on his thigh. His right elbow rested on the other thigh supporting a cupped hand which was under his chin. For a moment or two he rubbed his chin staring into the small but glowing fire.

"You know a man was killed when *Charon* was launched?"

She nodded.

Cater went on, still staring into the fire. "It's a sailor's superstition that if a ship kills a man at her launching she never has any luck. She stays a killer for every year she is afloat and, so the story goes, never lasts longer than five years."

He looked up to meet her inquiring eyes.

"And do you believe all that stuff?"

He slowly shook his head.

"But I've heard enough about it this trip to last me a lifetime. If I'd had much more of it I would have flown off the handle at somebody. Wherever I turned there were damned deckies or firemen, heads together yammering away. Even Nobby was at it."

Suddenly he chuckled, then explained Nobby's plans for a delectable evening. He looked at the softly ticking clock.

"About now, I would say he is either well down to the gun'll in three X ale, or squaring off outside some pub in a fight." He shook his head slowly. "The amount of beer that man can put away, tck tck. He'll turn up tomorrow for his pay, a fair whack he has coming, and he'll be like a dog with a sore head, snapping at all within reach."

"I think you'll find a fair living each trip will soon shift that nonsense out of their heads," she comforted him. "Next trip you'll make that record you want and all the silly tales will fade away."

He rubbed one clenched hand into the palm of the other.

"That's the rub. Some of them, and they are good hands, say they're not going to sail on her again." He stood up and shrugged his shoulders. "That's something new in this port. Men refusing to sail with Ted Cater, and him skipper of a new ship."

CHAPTER V

CATER braced himself against the savage roll and scowled heavily through the rain and sea washed glass of the wheel-house.

For nearly forty hours *Charon* had been dodging along hove to while the gale reached its crescendo. It was an occupational hazard which trawlermen accepted with a surprising degree of philosophical resignation. All gales ended ultimately and some of them gave tenancy to the theory that a gale stirred the fish up, sent them congregating to their feeding places.

Charon had sailed on time and had reached the place where Cater intended to trawl without any untoward event happening.

On the short trip Cater had watched the new hands narrowly. They had replaced three who had, with shuffling feet and down-cast eyes made varying excuses for not shipping with him another trip.

One man had offered the fact that his wife was expecting a baby at any moment.

Cater's lips had been pursed when he recalled that the man had three older children, one for each year of his marriage.

"And what the hell do you think you can do around now," he had rasped. "Your part's been done a long time. All right. But I've got a long memory."

That man, and the others, knew that they had sailed their last trip with the top skipper out of the port and would regret it. They knew there would come the lean years, those years in the cycle of trawling when good, sound ships would go on making a loss, or barely covering expenses with no bonuses for the hands.

It would be in periods like that when a job on a trawler skippered by Cater or one or two others would mean a few pounds more in their meagrely lined pockets. They knew that there would be fierce competition to sail with them. And with Cater there would be no room for them.

But they did not sail. And Cater had scowled all the trip up to the fringe of the arctic. The scowl increased and became permanent when the glass started dropping after one day's fishing. One day which brought the bulging trawl aboard on three successive hauls full almost to bursting point with superb fish.

Cater heard the door clatter open behind him. He heard for a moment a sharp increase in the symphony of crashing seas, howling wind and the metallic labouring of the heaving ship.

"Tea." Nobby Clarke skilfully used an elbow jammed against the door and a foot against the wheel pillar while she went through a full sixty-degree roll from side to side with a wicked pitching twist for full measure.

Cater accepted the mug and instinctively timed the roll and pitch of the ship as he slowly disposed of its contents.

To a mind untutored to the savagery of the sea in a storm the scene would have been frightening. Towering green black seas, their tops whipped away in white spume, reared up ahead of *Charon* roaring toward her as if to swoop down and submerge her. Behind each was another, and yet another. She put her head down to meet the charge like a wounded bull. To the first shock she shuddered, then slowly with a twisting roll her bow would come up shouldering away solid water. She would give an almost triumphant shake before dropping her head again to slide down the steep incline ready to meet another.

It went on hour after hour, a metronomic monotony broken only occasionally when a shorter and steeper sea formed of the merging of two roared along out of tempo to catch *Charon* slightly off balance, to deluge her to the level of the base of the bridge with furious swirling water.

When such a sea hit her she shuddered, seemed to stop momentarily, adjust herself, then bored resolutely upwards once again to resume her tortured rolling and pitching.

"It's easing a bit," Clarke's words were more of a dogmatic statement than a question requiring an answer and Cater made no rejoinder. He squinted at mountainous seas and mentally agreed. Again, to the untutored mind there was little of comfort. The wind still howled almost unceasingly, the seas were still

following one another in angry tumult. But, no longer were the tops being savagely ripped away in wind-lashed spume. They heaved up to a creaming, boiling peak then rolled on. The weight was still there, the potential for incredible damage in a matter of moments, but it was easing.

Cater scratched his unshaven chin for a couple of moments, finished the contents of the mug, jammed it in a corner of the shelf before him.

"It'll be all day tomorrow before this little lot drops enough to shoot. Keep her on this course for a while. Gimme a call around midnight. I'll see what it's like and perhaps we'll dodge back come daylight."

"Aye aye, Skipper."

Daylight found *Charon* edging back along her course with a large, uneasy swell under her stern. Cater watched the cruiser stern of the ship lift and fall easily to the power of the rolling water behind her.

"Get 'em up. I'm going to shoot," Cater said tersely to the man at the wheel. "I'll take it."

The hand clattered off to call the sleeping deck-hands. In a few minutes the deck was full of intense activity, the long trawl, the iron-shod heavy boards and the snaking warp slid over the side and for a couple of hours *Charon* nudged along slowly.

"Get it in."

At times the waist of the ship was flooded to the rail as she rolled heavily but soon the bulging bag, or cod end, hung suspended over the partitions or pounds, glinting silvery and dripping ice-cold water.

Nobby Clarke slid under it, pulled sharply at a complicated knot which kept closed the cod end, ducked away swiftly as a cascade of threshing, leaping fish swirled down around his legs and around the oilskin-clad men waiting on the deck.

Clarke took one look, picked up a fish or two and turned to the bridge. He held his thumbs up and a grin split his face.

"Prime stuff, Skipper," he shouted.

Cater nodded and smiled. Already he was coping with some mental arithmetic involving time factors, number of hauls

possible as set against the almost inevitable onset of another gale promised by the wavering glass.

"Right, get it over again."

And again the heavy trawl slipped away over the side while the men, wading thigh deep among the fish, gutted and tossed into the pounds the gleaming harvest.

It looked confusing, but it was an orderly confusion, fish half the length of a man went hurling through the air, were seized, graded, roughly cleaned and were soon packed away below with layers of ice to preserve them.

Occasionally a man would slip and fall sprawling among the fish, his curses mingling with the ribald laughter of the rest.

Cater watched them for a moment, gave the lowering grey sky a swift scrutiny, then selected a cigarette which he lit.

A burst of laughter attracted his attention. He looked down on the deck and grinned. One of the men was doing a complicated shuffle in a desperate attempt to regain his balance having slipped on the congealed mass of blood and slime. It was the mirth provoking forward kicking movement always performed by an unfortunate who inadvertently steps on a banana skin. It was the frantic scuffle of feet brought to perfection by the almost immortal Charlie Chaplin and it ended the way such shuffles always end. Gravity claimed its own and the man fell backwards with a jolting thud. Cater watched him and waited for the floodgates of bad language to release their pent-up force.

But the man lay still, slowly as the ship rolled he slithered to the scuppers. The laughter stopped. In a scrambling rush Clarke and another man reached him.

Cater felt a tightening of the muscles at the back of his jaws. His heart thumped, seemed to miss a beat, then picked up the rhythm again with a heavier thump.

After a brief scrutiny Nobby lifted his head.

"A bad cut, Skipper. He's out like a light."

"Bring him to my berth."

In a few minutes he had the unconscious man lying on the floor of his room while he critically examined the wound. The

man was still unconscious, breathing heavily and his eyes were half open.

"Take the bridge, Nobby."

Clarke clattered from the room and Cater delved into his Board of Trade first-aid guide. He turned down the man's eyelid. No sign of blood there. Then he peered into his ears with another negative result.

"Couple of stitches will fix the cut. A bit of concussion. He'll be all right in a day or two."

He looked up and saw the seaman staring at the injured man and shaking his head slowly.

"I said he'll be all right in a day or two," Cater almost snarled it. "What's up with you, man. Haven't you ever seen a man take a crack on the head before?"

The man lifted his eyes without moving his head.

"Looks to me like his eyes are glazing over," he said doggedly.

"Get out on deck. I'll manage here. Pass the word to the cook I want some hot water. Go on. Get moving."

The man shuffled away with one last look at the supine deck-hand as he passed through the door.

In a couple of minutes Fudge came with a can of hot water and helped Cater with his rough surgery.

The wound was cleaned and stitched and the man was made comfortable on the settee without a word being exchanged between the two men. Eventually Cater stood up and squared his shoulders.

Fudge swayed easily to the movement of the ship, a bundle of blood-stained towels and swabs in his hand.

"Well. What are you thinking?" Cater barked it.

Fudge gave him look for look.

"The same as you. I'll dump this lot and get back to the galley. I've still got the spuds to do for those hungry gutted stiff."

"The same as me. What am I thinking?" Cater chased the furtive thought around the recesses of his mind. 'Is this man going to be another Pollack? Is she going to live up to her reputation. Is she going to kill another man? Is that what he was

thinking? Is that what the deck-hands are thinking and saying?"

Cater looked at the unconscious man and a gust of rage swept through him shaking him visibly.

"You ham-footed fool. I ought to kick your head to a bloody pulp. Why in hell did I ship you?"

He grated the words and his shoulders hunched up hard behind his ears until the shaking rage died as swiftly as it was born.

With a few deft movements he made the man as comfortable as he could, chocked him off with a couple of pillows and the hard cushion from the settee and clambered back up to the bridge.

Before he could speak Nobby said, "He'll be all right in a few hours. I've seen worse in the Hessel Road on a Saturday night."

Cater nodded briefly. "Can't see any signs of a fracture. Some concussion, perhaps. I'll wait a bit before sending any message."

The orderly confusion on the fore deck below drew to its logical end. The pounds of slippery fish were empty, an occasional sea climbed over the rail on the low waist washing away the slime and blood.

The men stood in little groups, relaxed, swaying to the rhythm of the roll, smoking but saying little, waiting for the next haul which would galvanize them once more into another burst of sustained activity.

Cater looked at the brass clock on the bulkhead behind him.

"Grub up," he said briefly. "We'll haul it after we've eaten. That'll be three hours down."

He moved toward the wheel. "I'll take her. You get your grub."

As Nobby Clarke rolled towards the group of men he picked up the closing fragment of talk.

"... every bleedin' trip it'll be something. Somebody'll cop out and..."

"You'll cop a clip under the ear-hole if you talk like that," Nobby rasped. He looked at the speaker and a thin smile crept across his lips. "That's Grimmy talk. The sort of stuff you hear on those bloody bread-and-herring Grimsby starvers."

He waited with pleasant anticipation for the almost inevitable blasphemous rejoinder from the Grimsby man. Nobby had touched on an age-old rivalry, one which had often in the old days led to gory battles, one which had the men of Grimsby constantly carrying a chip on the shoulder.

It was one of those odd things which had developed down through the ages of trawling, had become part of warp and weft of the industry. Possibly the proximity of Grimsby to the other great trawling centre, Hull, was part of the foundation of the rivalry.

But, if a Hull man shipped on a Grimsby trawler he did so prepared to weather the taunt of 'Yorky' said with a wealth of disdain and scorn. The position was reversed if a Grimsby man sailed on a Hull trawler. 'Grimmy' was almost sufficient to start a fight.

Strangely enough either could sail on Milford, Aberdeen, Leith or Fleetwood trawlers and the term 'Yorky' or 'Grimmy' carried no more dynamite than the identifying 'Scotty', 'Taff' or 'Geordie'.

So, when Nobby tossed his taunt into the conversation he knew it was a question of lighting the blue touch paper and standing clear to wait for the bang.

It didn't come. Instead the man removed a tattered remnant of a cigarette from his lips, flicked it over the side, stared hard at Nobby and turned towards the fo'c'sle down which the capacious pans of food were disappearing.

Nobody was more disconcerted than Clarke. The Grimsby man was widely known as the possessor of a flaring, flamboyant vocabulary which attained its most enriched form when the subject of 'Grimmies' was introduced into the conversation.

In silence the rest of the deck-hands followed the man below.

Once below decks the Grimsby man abandoned his new-found reticence.

"A man a trip that's what this bastard ship will kill."

A ready, expectant and absorbant audience hung on his words.

"She's different. I can feel it. Two dead 'uns and two smashed

up and how old is she? Only a few months. "This ship is going to be different to any other trawler on the seven seas," the owner said. She is. She's a Yorky murdering machine."

A growl of protest rumbled into life at this introduction of the perpetual parochial bone of contention.

"There's bin' Grimmy ships that killed men, and broken 'em," a squat, mahogany-faced deck-hand replied screwing up his eyes toward the Grimsby man. "I can name a couple right now."

This was authoritative opinion. The speaker was a man of Fleetwood, a man with leanings neither way.

"Name me one which killed two men and bashed up two in less than two trips."

"It was just bad luck. Maybe she'll go ten years and not have another man bashed."

The Grimsby man allowed a thin smile to creep over his face as he sat at the rough table with his tin plate of food before him.

"Aye, and maybe she won't go farther than the next haul before picking off another one. It looks like two a trip is going to be her average. Could be any one of us between now and pay-day."

The deck-hands tackled their meal in silence. Here was food for thought. It could be . . . anyone . . . the man sitting next, could even be . . . me. . . .

"Get it in," Clarke's voice came resonantly down the hatchway. "C'mon me lucky lads. It's pulling us under it's so full."

The Grimsby man was standing by the steep ladder leading to the deck. He stood with one foot on the lower rung, looked upwards to the now empty square of daylight, placed both hands on the ladder, looked around the fo'c'sle and said in a flat, level voice. "Me and him will meet ashore. Perhaps he'll say something about Grimmies. . . ."

His voice trailed off.

A deck-hand broke in with a laugh. "Remind him. He'll be glad to. Only tell us so that we can be there. It ought to be good."

The Grimsby man started climbing, looked down for a moment and said thinly, "It will."

Soon the men were battling with the 120-foot long ice-cold dripping trawl, heaving in unison and wresting a short length from the sea as the trawler rolled. Then the heavy cod end swung in board, glistening, bulging, heavy with fish.

And the grim performance of cleaning and stowing went on once more. Again the trawl slipped away over the side and the long warp snaked out.

"Fair enough, mixed lot, but some prime stuff there," Nobby reported to Cater. "How's he doing?" He jerked his head towards the hatch leading to the skipper's room.

"He'll be all right come morning. Just knocked out and a bad cut. No fracture, I think."

Cater looked critically out of the bridge window at the sky and sea.

"Glass is dropping again. I don't like the look of it. We'll make it a short one before the blow hits us."

The uniform grey of the sky had become tinged with a coppery tint, the wind had reached a steady and sustained growl, occasionally lifting it's voice to a higher note.

"Righto, Skipper. When you say."

"Give it another half hour."

And in the half hour the trawl was once more hauled, and once more the men wallowed waist deep in slippery fish.

The full gale hit them with a bang. It seemed that one minute the ship was wallowing along in the uneasy coppery swell. The next it was rearing its bow against creaming, vicious seas which roared along to the full accompaniment of the howling wind.

Cater was ready and waiting for it. He studied his chart for a few minutes made a pencil mark on it and laid off a course.

"We'll ride it out along here." He ran his finger across the chart. "See I get a call, if the wind shifts, and in any case come daylight."

He clattered away down to his room, looked critically at the still unconscious man who was breathing steadily and seemed at comparative ease. Then he climbed to his bunk, lay down and pulled a blanket over himself.

It seemed he had scarcely closed his eyes before a deck-hand was shaking him.

"Skipper. It's snowing like hell. Can't see the fo'c'sle head. And t'mate says there's a trawler in trouble south of us."

Cater screwed his eyes up against the light, sat up, shook his head vigorously and climbed from the bunk.

"I'll be up right away. How long's it been snowing?"

"Just started, but it's a real thick 'un."

"Who is it?" Cater asked coming straight to the point.

"It's a German trawler. He's been screaming his block off for half an hour. Now North Cape has picked him up—and Wick—and they are giving it to us in English."

Cater nodded, rubbed his hand over the streaming window in futile effort to break through the snow outside.

"How far away?"

"I make it near enough thirty miles north and east."

The radio set in the little wireless office behind the wheel coughed with a metallic tone and once again the north Scottish wireless station—which never sleeps, never misses a signal and is intimate friend of every trawler went through its formula.

Cater listened, made a note, opened the lee door of the wheel-house, peered into the maelstrom of the night.

"God help 'em. It'll be a dead plug into it. Bring her around, Nobby. Make it about nor'-east by east for a start."

"We could pass her fifty feet away and not see her," Clarke replied his eyes squinting at the compass as the seaman coaxed *Charon* on to a new course.

She had been lifting easily to the towering seas, taking an amount of water on board but disposing of it again with almost contemptuous ease.

Both Cater and Clarke knew that their chances of finding the stricken trawler were thinner than the proverbial hair. Their position was approximate, arrived at by dead reckoning and the damaged ship's position was even more problematical.

But neither advanced these points as an argument for not starting on the search. In fact neither gave the thought more than

a passing tenancy, just brief enough for it to be embodied into their over-all conception of the task before them.

Somewhere out in the snow-blinding darkness ahead of them was a ship in trouble. A trawler, a kindred worker, of another nation it is true, but a sister trawler. Out of the darkness had risen an overwhelming, towering mountain, it had caught her unprepared probably off balance from another cream-crested monstrous sea. For long agonizing seconds, perhaps half a minute it had kept its hold, pinning her down, smothering her, raging over her as it clamoured for the other seas to storm along, to help finally submerge this puny little craft which had defied them for so long.

She had fought clear, but with swept decks, even the slender comfort of the lifeboat was gone. And from the stokehold rose clouds of steam as the water drenched the fires.

She was helpless. And it had all happened in one minute.

Charon's easy rhythm was surrendered. Her progress became a savage, battering fight to gain distance, and to gain it in time.

She thrust her upflung bow at the roaring seas, defiantly shouldered away their worst efforts, rolled off the water from her decks and, gaining speed down one foaming sea used it to clamber up another, or to drive her head through. Each roll, each pitch, each shuddering lift and breath-taking dive was progress.

It went on for nearly four hours. Occasionally Cater or Clarke would open the lee door, peer out, or even step out and from the meagre shelter of the bridge try to pierce the whipping snow.

"Snow's stopping."

Both men said it almost in unison. The wind had taken on a shriller note. It was just as dark outside but they found they could see the crests of the roaring seas.

"That gives us a chance," Cater added. "I'll keep on this course for another half an hour. We should be past her then. From there I'll work back. It will be easier, only beam and quartering seas."

"Aye aye, Skipper. Oy, get some tea." Nobby turned a bleary eye on the deck-hand at the wheel. "I'll take her."

It was the trawlerman's version of 'Come the four corners of the world, and we shall shock them'.

Blow from the four corners of the world, snow, ice, gales and fog, dish out some tea, strong, generously sugared, a pint of it, scalding hot and anything the elements can produce will be tackled.

Finally *Charon* turned and started quartering the raving seas like a questing dog.

"It's near enough two hours since we heard her last," Clarke broke a long silence.

"No steam. Dynamo not working. More'n likely we'll find 'em all huddled in the wheel-house."

No suggestion that the two hours silence might mean the end. That the scream of the wind and the roar of the seas might be a requiem.

"And getting 'em off will be a picnic." Nobby's mind soared ahead visualizing the problems involved.

Cater nodded. He looked at the compass and altered course once again.

"Anybody else piped up?" Nobby asked.

"Too far north. Don't suppose there's a trawler within a hundred miles or two. Wonder what he was doing up here?"

"Searching for a new ground, maybe on the same lay as us. Lucky for him we was up here."

No tacit admission of ultimate failure or disaster, but shrewd assessment of the difficulties involved. No futile cursing of an event which was taking them away from their fishing ground to, perhaps, involve them in days of laboured towing.

Clarke embarked on an intricate operation of making a cigarette while using his elbows to fend himself off from the bulkheads as the violent roll swung him. Finally he plucked out the loose straggling ends of tobacco, started the cigarette glowing and looked at Cater.

"How's bloko doing below. Is he around?"

"Yes, not saying much, but he'll be fit enough to go back to the fo'c'sle in the morning. I'll . . ." suddenly Cater stiffened, peered closely through one of the lee windows, reached for the

binoculars, poised them for a moment, then lowered them.

"Got her. Fine on the starb'd bow. Take a look."

Clarke accepted the glasses, adjusted them once, peered through them for a while then said in an awed whisper, "Holy smoke! She's taken a beating. Cleaned right off." He looked at Cater momentarily and admiration crept into his voice.

"Picked her up smack on the button. Half a mile more to the south'rd and we'd have missed her."

Cater wasted no time on self-congratulation.

"I'm going to work around to weather and see what's moving on her. They've seen us." He jerked his head towards the vague shadow of the stricken ship. "They're trying to do something with a light. Get the lads cracking. Maybe I can get a tow over come daylight."

To one inexperienced the wallowing, helpless trawler was but a thickening of the dark sea. Even to a seaman not keyed up to watch she would have been passed in the night. It was pure instinct which led Cater's eyes to her. Had he been asked to break it down to detailed explanation he would probably have said it was an interruption in the almost uniform flashes of white from the cresting, wind-lashed seas, a burst of soaring spindthrift where there should have been a black rearing mass.

For the next few labouring hours he circled the trawler watching her narrowly the whole of the time. Providentially the snow squalls held off and the wind moderated slightly.

"She's deep, half full of water more'n likely, but she'll hold." Cater summed up after a couple of laboured circuits. "I it comes on thick again I'll try to take 'em off, but so long as it stays clear we'll make it a towing job."

Nobby grinned and rubbed his fingers together suggestively as if fingering bank-notes.

"Some bunce in the old oak chest if we get her in. Where'll you try for?"

Cater made no answer. That problem was already engaging part of his thoughts.

A grey, growling threatening morning was half spent when Cater turned, red eyed and weary to his small but efficient radio

set and sent off a message which behind its terse context hid a feat of wonderful seamanship.

In a few words he related that he had located the disabled trawler and had her in tow. He was heading WNW approximate speed three knots.

Not one word of the skilful nudging of *Charon* over the roaring crests tearing along with half a mile between them, edging her nearer in the dark valleys where the wind did not have so much grip, losing sight of the disabled ship for minutes at a time, holding and nursing his ship close to the other one while a light line secured to buoyant pellets drifted over to her.

Not a word of the acute, soul-searing disappointment when he saw the weary crew of the other trawler fumble and lose the light line. There was no description of his laborious circle around again and again until finally a mischievous sea, rearing and licking at the half-submerged cripple tossed the pellets and line clean over the bridge.

He omitted the skilful handling it took to keep his ship close while the heavier tow crept between them, until finally it was secured.

All those things were incidental. He sent just the essentials. Those who had lived with and by the sea would read between the lines; would know.

"Seems like we're always heading toward Iceland with some trouble or other," Fudge said dourly as he completed an intricate feat of balance and progression from his little galley aft to the bridge with a meal for Cater.

Cater grinned at him. "Get wet coming along?"

Fudge glared. "Be just as easy for you to come down for it. Ship's not going to run away while you eat. I took wooden head some grub in your room. That all right?"

Cater nodded. "Yes. He can go below now. He's O.K. Looked at his head at all today?"

"I'm cook on this ship, not a parishin' doctor. I did as a matter of fact. Clean as a whistle. It's all solid wood from the chin up anyway."

Fudge delayed at the door for a moment. What passed for

a smile lit his face with a wintry glint. "The boys are saying this should be a top trip for pay. Better'n getting frozen hauling trawls and gutting fish. Maybe our luck's changing."

Cater looked at him bleakly.

"We're not in yet. And it will be six months before they get anything. If they get it . . . and the sooner I get back catching fish the better I'll like it."

Fudge turned away.

"And cut out that bloody nonsense about luck," Cater said.

All through a grey, tempestuous day *Charon* plugged along with her sullen charge wallowing and pitching behind.

Nobby Clarke and the bo'sn shared watches on the bridge, but Cater remained there all the time. He never relaxed for a moment easing the strain when the sea threatened to part them, altering course occasionally when he judged it would be to some advantage, keeping a constant, critical eye on the sagging hawser between the two ships.

Grey day slowly changed to darker and greyer twilight and the almost ceaseless moan of the wind interpolated an occasional deeper-throated growl as if warning of the furies it could produce during the darker hours.

Cater tapped the barometer with a finger tip and pursed his lips at the minute but ominous legend it related.

"Dropping slightly and the wind's backing. I doubt if she'll stand a full blow during the night," Clarke said.

Cater looked sideways at him. "It hasn't started a full blow yet. And if it does I'll fetch 'em around to put it on the quarter. I'm going to get this trawler in."

The last sentence was uttered with a pause and distinct emphasis on each word.

Clarke shrugged slightly. "We'll want a bit of luck, but. . ."

Cater spun around and faced the second hand, shoulders hunched, chin out thrust and a deep scowl on his face.

"For Christ's sake shut up about luck, Clarke." His eyes bored into Nobby's. "There's been more bloody nonsense talked about luck on this ship in the past couple of months than on any other in ten years. Now. For the last time cut it out."

Slowly Clarke disengaged his eyes, flicked back one more look, then peered out of the lee-side window. The short tirade had not unduly shaken him. He was far too tough for that, hammered and tempered as he had been in a school in which every-day conversation was almost entirely lurid cursing. It was the use of his surname. Never in the years they had sailed had Cater called him anything else but 'Nobby'. It was the rasped 'Clarke' which almost stunned him into silence.

Cater broke a long silence.

"How's the tow wearing?"

"Easy. I veered a bit. And I've wrapped new sacks, well greased where it comes inboard."

Cater nodded briefly.

Methodically he mentally reviewed all he had done, and arrayed in his mind what he could do in any eventuality. In the forefront was the pattern of what to do if the weather worsened appreciably or if the tow parted. He worked out how he would restore contact, or range as close alongside as he could to the lee side of the lame trawler and rescue the crew.

The night wore on seeming to be endless. Occasionally the growl of the wind offered a threat, but it seemed an empty threat.

It was nearly daylight when a thin, high-pitched yell thrilled through the cacophony of groans from labouring metal, roaring seas and throbbing wind.

"Tow's pa-a-arted."

It came from the bo's'n who had clambered aft on one of the many trips of inspection Cater had insisted on throughout the night.

Cater took the wheel from the deck-hand. "Call Nobby. Tell him to switch the deck floods on as he goes aft."

As the man lurched through the door on his errand Cater jerked the wheel around, let the little steering engine run until the helm was hard over. From the open window on the lee side he peered out until he located the wallowing trawler now coming on his beam.

He worked *Charon* around in a slow half circle until she was only a short distance away to windward of his tow. He steadied her and rang 'stop engines'.

Below him, on the foredeck he could hear the big trawling winch clattering away heaving at the broken tow. Aft, around the bits he could see Nobby and half a dozen hands grouped under a glaring flood-light.

Nobby's hand suddenly shot up. "Vast heaving."

The clatter of the winch stopped. A deck-hand left the group and staggered along the heaving deck.

"Tow's parted her end. We're all ready to pass it over again, Skipper."

Cater visualized what had happened. The weary, dispirited crew of the disabled trawler had made it fast hurriedly, without delaying to take precautions against chafe and the steady sawing of the sea had worn through the many-stranded wire.

"Right, stand-by to pass the pellets and light line. She's riding all right. I'll wait a bit until it's a shade lighter."

And when fine silver of lighter grey sliced through the pre-dawn darkness once again the tow was passed and made secure by hunched weary figures on the other ship.

While this operation was being carried out Fudge arrived on the bridge with some food and scalding tea.

"Just what I wanted, Fudge. You can have an extra cut of the salvage," Cater grinned.

Fudge grunted, wiped his hands on a dirty, greasy apron tucked up around his waistband.

"Get it first, I'll be satisfied with my whack."

After looking around the heaving sea for a few moments Fudge turned to go.

"Your lodger has gone back to his peeky hole," he said flatly. "Want me to have a look at his noggin later on."

"If you will. Don't muck it about if it's all right. He'll probably be turned in now."

Charon resumed her slow, laborious tow triumphantly rearing her flaring bow at the rolling seas.

"I whipped a couple of greasy sacks on the outboard eye,"

Nobby offered between gulps from a steaming mug. "Should last out. How far to go?"

Cater rubbed a hand around his unshaven chin.

"Late afternoon, with luck."

He caught Nobby's raised eyebrows at his use of the forbidden word. For a moment they looked at each other then grinned.

"It was you said it," Nobby chuckled. He buried his face in the mug once more and emerged visibly refreshed. "Fleming seems to be better," he continued referring to the injured seaman. "I saw him mooching around the deck as we lashed up. Trust a Yorkie head to take a wallop like that and come up smiling."

Cater devoted himself to a cigarette, looked critically aft towards the lame trawler and glanced at the clock.

"I think I'll call 'em up and tell 'em how we're getting along. Maybe they'll send a tug for the last few miles."

"How will that affect our salvage?" Nobby asked anxiously.

"There's a world of difference between just taking a ship into anchorage and rendering aid when she's in trouble. Owners will take care of that, don't you fret."

In a protected anchorage well up in a fiord in Iceland a powerful salvage tug throbbed into activity as Cater's message was relayed to her. The Dutch captain studied his chart, pondered over a mathematical problem involving wind speed and direction, drift, visibility, speed of his own squat ship and that of *Charon*.

"We sail in one hour," he said gutturally. "Pity it is only a tow. Better it was salvage, but better than nothing."

On *Charon* Cater, down in his berth sluiced some cold water over his face and head. She was riding fair, weather was no worse, maybe he could get his head down for a couple of hours sleep. With reliable Clarke on the bridge he could rely on a call in any emergency.

He remembered the injured seaman and a wry look twisted his face. Better have a look at his head before getting in some sleep.

Cater stepped to the door of his room. He saw a couple of deck-hands yarning and smoking on the lee side.

"Give Fleming a shout," he said. "I want to dress his head."

In a few minutes there was a knock at his door. "Fleming ain't in the fo'c'sle. The boys thought he was up here with you."

Cater sat bolt upright. "Tried the galley? Tried the engine-room?"

The ship was searched from stem to stern.

Fleming had disappeared.

"Where? When? How?" Question after question Cater rapped at bewildered deck-hands. "Who saw him last? What was he doing? Where was it?"

At the end of a rapid-fire inquiry he had two facts.

The injured man had last been seen three hours before,
AND HE WAS NOT NOW ON BOARD.

For an age-long twenty minutes Nobby fought with a man who hovered on the fringe of temporary insanity.

The struggle started in the wheel-house. Nobby watched Cater run his hand through his tousled head. He saw rich red suffuse the skipper's face turning the wind and water tan to a dark purple. He saw it drain away, and an inarticulate noise rumbled in Cater's throat.

With deadly quietness, almost in a whisper the man said, "Slip the tow. I'm going back to look for him."

His hand reached out for the engine-room telegraph.

Nobby intercepted it.

"You can't do that, Skipper. You can't leave this busted ship on her own."

"To hell with the ship. I'm going back." He wrestled with Nobby's detaining hand. "I'm going back. Slip that bloody tow."

It developed into a wrestling match with the handle of the telegraph as immediate prize.

Suddenly Cater broke away, scrambled through the door, dropped to the deck and lurched aft. Nobby clambered after him. They closed again near the bitts around which was turned the towing wire. Breast to breast, knee to knee they locked in a surging, heaving struggle.

Finally, his muscles cracking, Clarke pinned Cater to the rail. Their faces were inches apart. Gradually Nobby felt the

other's resistance slowly decrease. He kept his hold and panted.

"Look at the sea. Where would you start to search? Look at it."

Slowly Cater turned his head to watch the cresting, rearing mountains of water. He continued the turn until he took in the sullen, pitching cripple at the end of the tow. His shoulders perceptibly dropped. As slowly his head returned until he and Nobby were looking into each other's eyes. Cater closed his for a moment. Nobby heard him mutter.

"Another one. He wasn't hurt badly. Another one. A man a trip. *Charon's* luck."

He heaved suddenly at Nobby's restraining arms, but it was only a momentary phase. He exhaled, his shoulders dropped again and Clarke stepped back.

Cater turned slowly and rolled back to the bridge, looked briefly at the compass, at the sea, aft at the towed ship and went down to his room.

Three hours later the man called Grimmy clattered down to Cater's room. The skipper was lying down on his settee.

He shook Cater. "The tug's closing us and its started snowing again."

Cater stirred, rolled over on his back.

"T'hell wi' tug. Slip t'tow. Slip it. . . . Man a trip . . . *Charon's* luck. . . ."

Grimmy peered at him, took in the empty whisky bottle by Cater's knees, clicked his teeth and turned to the door.

In the wheel-house, with a thin grin twisting his lips he pointed significantly to the skipper's door.

"Stinko," he said emphatically. "Ten fathoms deep stinko. You couldn't get him upright with a derrick."

Nobby's steel-like arm swept him to one side.

"Get aft and help with that tow," he grated. After the man had disappeared Nobby clattered down to Cater's berth, took one quick look, hoisted Cater to his feet and made for the bridge ladder.

"You'll be on the bridge when we hand over if I have to crucify you on it," he grunted and he battled his way back to the bridge with his unresisting burden.

The fresh air revived Cater enough to enable him to cling to the rail, eyes out of focus quite indifferent to the operation of handing over to the tug.

Finally *Charon* swung away from the tug and her burden, passed close to her and exchanged arm waves then on past the crippled trawler. A thin, ragged cheer came from the little group clustered on her bridge and *Charon's* crew answered.

Nobby jangled the telegraph and stepped nearer to Cater who hung swaying.

On the deck below Grimmy stood, legs widely straddled, scratching his head beneath his oilskin hat.

For his benefit Nobby said loudly, "O.K. Skipper, East-nor'-east it is. An' give you a call at six."

He steadied Cater's swing, helped him to the top of the ladder and watched him narrowly as he struggled down.

Charon went back to fishing, ship and men driven remorselessly by an unrelenting Cater. She made a record catch which, together with her rescue of the German trawler made front-page news in the local newspapers and a sizeable paragraph in the national papers.

But trawlermen shook their heads slowly from Milford Haven to Fleetwood. From Fleetwood to Aberdeen. From Aberdeen to Leith, to the Tyne, the Humber and Grimsby.

From the fishing grounds off Ireland to Rockall, off the Faroes, up beyond Cape North to Bear Island and south east of Iceland they heard and shook their heads.

Charon had killed another man.

CHAPTER VI

BEN CHRISTIAN sat with his chin resting on his clenched fists, elbows straddled on the table. It made his shoulders hunch in pugnacious fashion although there was nothing of pugnacity in his thoughts.

For the past hour he had been reading Cater's report on the last trip. Try as he might he could find no fault in it either from a seaman's point of view or on humanitarian grounds.

Cater had done all that a competent seaman could be expected to do. A man had been injured, a natural hazard in deep sea fishing. He had been attended to and cared for to the best ability of the skipper.

A ship had been in distress in extremely heavy weather and Cater, with considerable skill had taken her in tow and had nursed her through a gale to safety where another and less skilled man would have been more than content to rescue the crew.

Sometime during the tow the injured man had wandered on deck and had disappeared.

While he had read the report Christian had searched hard for any small point which could be criticized. And he had failed.

Now, in his thoughts, he was no longer a trawler owner. He was living the trip on *Charon*, searching with a seaman's mind and again failing.

The loss of the seaman on what was undoubtedly a record financial trip, apart from any possible salvage was just bad luck.

Christian frowned as the word 'luck' crept into the intricate pattern of his thoughts.

He dropped his hands and leaned back in his chair. As he settled his shoulders the box-like house phone buzzed imperatively. Christian leaned forward, flicked the switch down.

"Yes?"

"Skipper Cater to see you, sir."

"Send him in right away."

The girl at the other end of the phone turned to Cater.

"Will you go in, Skipper?" She smiled softly. "Flat calm, glass steady . . . good luck later."

Cater answered her with a smile and moved towards Christian's room.

"Take a chair, Ted. How d'you feel?" He tossed over a typed and tabulated list for Cater to read. "It was a record, all

right. For anybody else—or you for that matter—to touch it again, never mind beating it, will take some doing.”

Cater allowed his eyes to skim down the sales extract before answering. Finally he tossed it back on to the table.

“We can do it again,” he said flatly. “I found the best spot a bit to the west of where I had been before. I tried a haul on the way back after handing over the German and we were smack into ’em. Ten fathoms thick.”

Christian nodded. For a while the men sat in silence. Both knew that shooting a trawl, its contents, and the possibilities of the next trip were secondary thoughts in their minds.

Eventually Christian picked up Cater’s report.

“I’ve been through this, Ted. I can think of nothing you left undone. The man was injured, you treated him. And sometime during the early morning he got out on deck and disappeared. It’s happened before. It will happen again. So long as ships go to sea somebody will fall overboard.”

Cater ran his hand over his hair and let it follow on down the powerful curve of the back of his neck.

“If it hadn’t been for the German I would have sent a hand to help him down to the fo’c’sle. But the tow parted, and we were all busy.”

Christian nodded slowly, put his elbow on the table, propped his chin between forefinger and thumb.

“Like to switch ships, Ted?”

Cater stood up swiftly and barked his answer.

“No.” A moment later he followed it up. “Why? Do you want me to?”

“Not at all. I wondered how you felt about it.”

“There’s nothing wrong with the ship. She’s the best in the port. It just seems that we’ve had. . . .” Cater hesitated before completing the sentence.

“There’s nothing wrong with the skipper, either, and you’ve both had a bit of bad luck,” Christian said steadily. “But you’ve had your good luck too. This last trip’s earnings, plus the salvage should fill your stocking for a while.”

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available up to now," he replied. "There may be others come to light as a result of this inquiry. Will you be seated, please."

The reproof was barbed enough to penetrate the durable skin of Connell.

His face flushed as he took a seat and busied himself extracting papers from a brief-case. He gave Christian and Cater one look, nodded briefly and sat back on the hard chair with his arms folded and chin out-thrust aggressively.

Nobby Clarke leaned forward and under cover of a concealing hand across his mouth whispered, "Proper Grimmy bastard, ain't he? Out for trouble and if there ain't any he'll make some."

He jumped visibly when he heard his named called and the clerk accompanying the official had to repeat it before Nobby realized that he was being called to give evidence and was not being reprimanded for talking.

The official looked briefly but keenly at Nobby.

"You are Leonard Oliver Clarke, and you were Second Hand on the trawler *Charon* on her last trip." It was a statement rather than a question and Nobby nodded, meanwhile allowing a bleak eye to travel around the assembly of tough seaman for a brief reaction to his full name.

"Will you tell us what happened, in your own words, and at this point I should make it clear that you are not bound to say anything which you feel might incriminate you in any future proceedings which may be taken."

That clouded Nobby's intellect considerably and he shuffled his feet.

The official waited patiently, then gently prodded Nobby.

"You were on deck when Fleming received his injury. Can you help us as to how it happened?"

From then onwards Clarke's narrative was simple. They had hauled, shot again and were gutting and stowing the fish. Fleming must have trod on a bit of fish, slipped and fallen backwards. It wasn't a hard fall and they expected to see him get up again. Men often slipped like that. When it was seen he was hurt he was taken to the skipper's berth and was treated for his

injury. The man was unconscious. He did not see the man again except for a short interval when they were dealing with the tow a couple of days afterwards. He was standing upright near the short ladder which leads down from the engine-room casing to the deck. Clarke assumed he was making his way back to the fo'c'sle. In reply to a question—the weather was moderate, a bit of a sea, but nothing solid coming aboard when he saw Fleming standing there. Although it was darkish there was no mistaking him. The deck flood-lights were on and he could see his bandaged head.

The official nodded slowly.

"Anything else, Mr. Clarke?"

Nobby shook his head.

By a brief glance the union official was included and invited to put a question.

"What treatment was this man given for his fractured skull?" he asked.

Before Clarke could answer he was stopped by an upraised hand.

"There has been no evidence given that the man sustained a fracture of the skull," the presiding official said suavely. "We have heard only of an injury to the back of the head."

The union man pushed ahead doggedly. "What was done for him?"

Nobby looked at him for a moment, met out-thrust jaw with out-thrust jaw.

"I didn't do it. I went back to take bridge. Skipper tied him up proper, according to the book."

"But what treatment . . .?"

Nobby demolished the attack. "Ask skipper, he did it," he replied tersely.

"We will hear details of the treatment from . . ." the controller of the inquiry leaned forward and glanced at his papers, "from Skipper Cater.

"Thank you, Mr. Clarke."

Nobby resumed his seat, wiped his forehead and decided that he would rather do a haul in half a gale than sit up there,

stuck up like a sore thumb for all to see, answering a lot of questions.

"Skipper Cater."

Ted Cater climbed to his feet and moved to the chair recently vacated by Nobby.

"You are Edward Cater, skipper of the *Charon* on her last trip?"

"Yes."

Christian watched the union official as Cater told his story. He detected a gleam in the man's eyes and once or twice saw him wriggle impatiently on his seat as if anxious to jump to his feet to slam questions at the skipper.

The story ran on all fours with Clarke's up to the point where the man had been taken to his berth. Cater explained how he cleaned up the wound, examined the man to the best of his limited medical and surgical knowledge. There was no sign of bleeding from the ears or the eyes and he could feel no obvious depression. He concluded the man was suffering from concussion but to be on the safe side treated him for fractured skull.

Cater's story, told with complete simplicity and without hesitation reached its end.

The uncanny accuracy with which he had reached the stricken trawler, the passing of the tow, the long, laborious drag through the hours of bad weather he sketched in but briefly. Sometime during those arduous hours he recalled somebody saying that Fleming had gone back to the fo'c'sle. He could not remember whom. About that time he had been awake and on the bridge for nearly forty-eight hours.

Fleming had recovered consciousness. He had not spoken much except to say his head was sore and it ached.

On being told that the man was not in the fo'c'sle he had instituted an immediate and thorough search of the ship.

"How long had elapsed between the time Fleming was reported missing and when he was last seen?"

Cater thought for a moment.

"Around three hours."

"At what speed were you towing?"

"About three to four knots at the most."

"So he would, at the maximum, have fallen overboard about twelve miles astern?"

"Yes sir."

"And what time was it you received the report?"

"About three o'clock in the afternoon, little before perhaps."

"The weather was what?"

"Blowing up, some snow squalls, fairly heavy sea, glass was dropping a bit."

"Did you consider returning to search for Fleming?"

Cater heard a quick shuffle of feet, glanced into the body of the hall and saw Nobby Clarke leaning forward poised in his chair ready to leap to his feet.

"I did consider it for a . . . a . . . little while. But it would have been dark by the time we slipped and cleared the tow. Searching would have been almost impossible with any accuracy because both ships had been yawing all over the show." Cater stopped, shrugged his shoulders and spread his hands. "Where could I start? On what line?"

The official nodded slowly. "I appreciate the dilemma confronting you, Skipper Cater. Go on, please."

Cater continued, "If I had slipped the tow and gone back twelve or fifteen miles and searched and not found him—or even if I had found him—I would have had to start looking again for the German trawler. She was in no condition to be left. Beam on she would have lasted less than an hour. And there was a round dozen and a half men on her."

For a moment or two the official leaned on the table, hands together as if praying. He looked out of the window, rubbed his hands slowly and Cater heard the faint rasp of the skin.

"One more question, Skipper. When Fleming recovered consciousness did he strike you as being wandering in his mind? Or was he completely . . . completely balanced?"

"He seemed all right. Complained a bit about headache."

"Was he restless when you saw him last?"

"No, he was lying down. He asked for a cigarette and I gave him one."

Once again the official nodded, scrutinized some notes he had before him and looked up at the union man.

"Would you care to put any pertinent questions?"

There was just the faintest emphasis on the word 'pertinent'.

The man bustled to his feet, cleared his throat and said loudly, "What made you decide not to search back for Fleming?"

Before Cater could answer, the presiding official interjected. "Skipper Cater has already explained that to my satisfaction. He had to make the choice, an exceedingly slim chance of finding the man, or to continue on with his task of taking a ship and crew to safety."

The union man shook his head doggedly and went on.

"You first picked up the German after a long search—lot longer than three hours, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"You found her in the dark?"

"Yes."

"Would it not have been possible for you to slip back on your course, returning afterwards to the German?"

Cater looked steadily at him.

"Slipping back over my course would not have been a search," he said. "In that sea a man would not last a few minutes. The cold would get him anyway. And Fleming was a sick man."

"So it amounts to this. You would take a chance in the dark to find a ship—good salvage money, but wouldn't take a chance searching for a man overboard. . . ."

The official smacked his hand down on the desk. "You must not ask that question. Do not record it," he instructed his clerk.

"I'm entitled to. . . ."

"You are entitled to precisely nothing," the official broke in coldly. "I am holding this inquiry and you are permitted to ask questions, in so far as they apply, as a point of courtesy only. Sit down please."

"The fact remains that Cater wouldn't turn back because. . . ."

"Sit down."

"You're a flaming liar."

Both statements were simultaneous. The first came from the

now angry official. The second from a livid Nobby Clarke who was on his feet and scrabbling among the chairs trying to make his way to the table.

"He wanted to cut the tow. Me and him had an up-and-downer all over the ship before I stopped him."

Nobby suddenly remembered where he was.

"Excuse me, sir. But that's true and Skipper can tell you. We wouldn't have had a cat in hell's chance of finding Fleming. He wanted to cut tow and go back. We . . . we wrestled a bit until he saw it my way."

"Thank you, Mr. Clarke. Please be seated."

"I didn't come here to be insulted . . ." the union man bridled. "I'm here to ask questions which I'm. . ."

"And you're still a herring-gutted Grimmy liar," Nobby barked.

"Gentlemen." The official was on his feet. "I propose to adjourn this inquiry for half an hour until tempers have cooled down. When we resume please keep in the forefront of your minds the fact that it is I who am holding the inquiry and it is I who will decide what are pertinent questions." He moved toward a door at his rear. "Half an hour, gentlemen."

As Cater rejoined Christian the trawler owner said quietly, "You'd better take a quick turn around your second hand or he and the union man will be going to the mat for a knock down and drag out. Quickly, get him."

Cater intercepted the irate seaman who was gravitating towards the union official and steered him toward Christian.

"So you are Nobby Clarke," Christian said extending a hand. "Cater tells me you are just about ready to take your skipper's ticket. Come and see me when you get it."

Clarke was completely at ease with the trawler owner and in a few moments they were talking of ships and trawls and haul, and Nobby's tumultuous rage subsided.

It flared up again for a moment when Nobby's eye caught the Grimsby seaman who had sailed on *Charon* talking to the union man. They had their heads close together and the seaman was talking animatedly.

Eventually the precise clerk re-entered the room and said in stilted tones, "Be seated, gentlemen. The inquiry will be resumed in a moment."

The men were still shuffling their feet and scraping chairs when the official took his seat. For a minute or two he studied his papers then looked up.

"There are no more questions to ask Skipper Cater, that I can see." He looked pointedly at the union man. "He has given us a clear picture of events leading up to the injury of the seaman Fleming and his treatment of the man. I now propose to call . . ." his finger-tip traced down a list, "Christopher Logie, who was a deck-hand on the *Charon*."

The Grimsby seaman climbed awkwardly to his feet and lurched toward the chair.

"You have heard Skipper Cater and Second Hand Clarke describe how Fleming was injured, how he was treated, and how he was last seen on deck while the tow was being re-established. Did you see Fleming on deck?"

"I did. He was at t'foot of bridge ladder."

"What were you doing?"

"I was guiding messenger to winch."

The official looked slightly puzzled. "Messenger?" he queried.

Cater stood up. "A short wire line we used from the main tow to the winch."

"Thank you, Skipper. Continue Logie."

"He said he was going down to his bunk. I asked him to get out of the way of the messenger. When I turned around a bit later he was not there."

"Did he seem ill, or dizzy? Did it strike you that he might have fallen overboard at that moment?"

"Nay. I thought he had gone down fo'c'sle."

"You didn't see him again."

Logie shook his head.

The official wrote some notes for a minute or so then looked up.

"Any questions you want to ask, Mr. Connell?"

"One or two, sir."

Connell climbed to his feet and started off loudly as if addressing a meeting.

"In your opinion, Mr. Logie, was Fleming in a fit state to be allowed around the deck at that time?"

The official frowned and tapped the table with a finger-nail.

"I don't want to restrict you in any way, Mr. Connell, but can Logie answer that satisfactorily? He cannot give a medical opinion and he says he saw Fleming for only a moment or two."

"He can say if it struck him that Fleming was ill," Connell stuck doggedly to his theme.

"We know that he was, Mr. Connell. He had been more or less unconscious for some time."

"He can say if he thought Fleming was too ill to be about the deck on his own."

The official's voice hardened. "I have already asked him that and Logie's reply was 'I thought he was going down to the fo'c'sle'. I accepted that as an assurance that Logie was not unduly perturbed about Fleming other than him getting in the way of the messenger wire."

"Well, can't we have Logie saying that?" Connell displayed a certain urgency in pressing his point.

"If it satisfies you, by all means ask it."

"What did you think, Logie, when you saw Fleming staggering about the deck?"

Logie went through his answer in a monotone, mouthing it like a well-learned lesson.

"I thought it was a damned shame that Skipper couldn't spare a hand to help the poor fellow. It seemed the tow and salvage was more important."

Flaring temper, cold official rage and blood surging passion swept into the one main channel creating a tidal wave of pandemonium.

Cater jumped to his feet trying in vain to shake free the restraining, iron clasp of Christian on his arm. The presiding official's voice cut through like a razor-sharp knife.

"There was no suggestion that Fleming was staggering and

Logie's obviously inspired answer will not be recorded. Sit down or leave the room, Mr. Connell."

"I'll break your neck, you bread-and-herring starve-gutted Grimmy liar," Nobby raved, struggling with two seamen who hung grimly to him.

Gradually, by force of character the official brought the inquiry to a sane level once more. He dismissed Logie with a brief phrase. Listened in silence to Fudge's brief contribution.

Finally he summed it up briefly. "From the evidence"—with a scarcely perceptible emphasis on the word 'evidence'—he concluded: "I can find no blame attached to anybody. Sometime in the three hours that elapsed between Fleming being seen on deck and the report of his disappearance he presumably fell overboard. There has been no suggestion that he was pushed overboard, or knocked overboard. The ship was rolling enough for it to upset the balance of a sick and injured man. At the material time the skipper and crew were engaged in a task of mercy, succouring a disabled ship. The full context of my findings, both on the evidence given here and certain questions which were put and upon which I will comment, will be made known later." He stood up and his eyes swung around the room as he said, "Thank you gentlemen for your assistance." Momentarily his glance rested on Cater. "It is unusual for me to say so much immediately at the close of a hearing of this description but I will say that the general conclusion of my report will be that neither Skipper Cater nor any member of his crew were in any way responsible for the death of the deck-hand Fleming."

He clipped the catch of his brief-case, bowed briefly and left the room.

True to his word his subsequent report in full completely cleared Cater officially. But in the dockside pubs, in the fo'c'sles of trawlers the brutally unfair legend grew. The saga of *Charon* developed vicious undertones.

Snatches of the question and answer from the inquiry were repeated again and again, were twisted out of shape, remoulded, opinion became grafted on and when finally it emerged the legend was that Cater and *Charon* had killed a man for money, left

him to drown astern while he and she towed blood money in the shape of salvage to harbour.

Vainly the few loyal members of the crew who had been at the inquiry fought against the legend. When they heard the slanderous story they tried, in their inarticulate fashion, to contradict it, to repeat what had happened at the inquiry.

But, came the bludgeoning questions, didn't the man from the union get it out in evidence that the tow was what counted? Didn't he get it out in evidence that the poor lad was hanging over ship's side screaming for help and skipper made crew work like mad getting tow aboard? Didn't he get it out in evidence that skipper turned poor injured lad out of his room in a howling gale and chase him down to fo'c'sle? Always that fragment of truth which made the lie so difficult to nail down.

Most of the purveyors of the stories had never seen *Charon*, never heard of Skipper Cater. To them it was a high-light, something different from their usual pitifully restricted repertoire of conversational gambits, something to be squeezed to the full—until the Sunday newspapers afforded a substitute with the gory details of the latest murder.

To Nobby Clarke fell the only satisfactory occasion for refuting the story, and that came after a resolute search of the town's pubs which catered for trawlermen.

He started under a handicap. Cater, eyes icy cold forced from him a promise that he would not seek out and pick a quarrel with the Grimsby seaman on his behalf, so well could Cater read Nobby's mind.

But kindly fate, and the Grimsby seaman played into his hands.

Nobby and his acolytes entered the saloon bar of The Chain Locker and standing at the bar was the seaman surrounded by a knot of eager listeners.

"Go on, tell us what the bloke said," prompted the barman. "What did he say about that, about leaving a man to drown. . . ."

Nobby's eyes slid around to take in the Grimsby man. Somewhere in the recesses of his mind the deck-hand found a lurking respect for what could happen to people who slandered.

"Go on, don't let me spoil the conversation," said Nobby silkily. "I've got all night."

The barman moved toward Nobby and his party.

"Four pints, mild and bitter, best bitter," Nobby ordered.

"Yes, get Leonard and his friends a drink. They've bin talking a lot today. Leonard must be thirsty," the Grimsby man gibed.

Contact, and glory be. Nobby felt a surge of joy. This was not skipper's quarrel. This was personal.

The Grimsby man staggered back wiping the greater part of a pint of beer from his eyes and face. The barman, experienced in such matters jumped to harvest all the breakables within reach, others curved protecting hands around their pints.

There were the usual preliminaries, a brief flurry of half-arm blows then supporters of both sides got their champions out into the open air, into the moonlit and street lamp illuminated square of waste ground.

To the Grimsby man's credit he was more than willing and he was game together with a certain proficiency in rough and tumble fighting.

People still talk of the fight with bated breath—a fight watched by a police sergeant and constable with helmets carefully concealed. How finally Nobby, bruised and battered, both eyes rapidly closing, a mouth a shapeless gory mass, stripped down to elementals, swayed wide legged over his senseless opponent and growled a hoarse challenge to anybody who had anything to say about Cater, or *Charon* and if not, then anybody from Grimsby would do. It was a blood-chilling challenge—and it was not accepted when Nobby's dazed but prideful acolytes led him away from labour to refreshment.

CHAPTER VII

THE legend grew, became evergreen nourished by dockside anecdotes. *Charon* moved in harbour and a careless workman got

in the way of a tautening wire. It broke his leg, a simple injury. But it was *Charon* who did it.

At sea a deck-hand, clambering down the hold to stow fish, slipped and fell cracking a couple of ribs. A simple injury. But it was *Charon* who did it.

In the passing years she continued to top fishing records. People grudgingly admitted that she made money.

Cater risked life and ship closing in to the gale-lashed rocky coast of the Orkney Islands off Stromness to take off the crew of an Icelandic trawler. For that he was presented with a piece of plate by a grateful Icelandic government. People touched on that in passing reference, but dwelt at length on the fact that in the rescue two of the men were drowned. It was *Charon* who did it.

When she steamed sturdily through the fiords men would watch her pass. "Aye, she'll make a pot of money, but somebody will pay with blood. I wouldn't ship in her for a wad of dough that would choke a horse. Somebody will pay, mark what I say."

She was the ship which always killed or maimed her man. She was the ship . . . he was the skipper . . . it was on her that a man was left to drown . . . it was on her that somebody died, or was hurt. She killed a man the day she was launched. Her skipper was granite hard. A killer in command of a killer. Conversation never lagged when *Charon* was mentioned.

If a deck-hand, back from poverty-stricken trip put his bare wages, less substantial drinking money, into his carping wife's hands he silenced her criticism with one short challenge.

"Well, what d'ye want me to do. Sign on *Charon*?"

It was enough.

Cater inevitably heard some of the stories, so did his wife. Only once was it briefly discussed and for the one and only occasion Cater swore at her. In a few flaying words he forbade her to mention the adjectival boozier talks again.

Nobby Clarke's score of gory fights mounted in bone crushing companionship with his awe inspiring reputation as a scrapper, but nothing stopped the legend.

Ben Christian built new ships, as large, as well fitted as *Charon*. Each in turn he offered to Cater.

The answer was "No."

Once Christian, seeing the growing and hardening canker in Cater's soul decided to move him without consulting him.

After one of her periodic overhauls and refits *Charon* lay practically ready for sea. Christian put another reliable skipper in command and sat back waiting for the storm.

It never arrived. Cater asked for an interview. The secretary looked closely at him as he went in. "Glass steady, calm," she smiled. "Maybe a squall or two around?" The last was a query.

Cater shook his head and smiled briefly. "No squalls."

It was typical of him that he wasted no time on preliminaries. He strode over to Christian's desk.

"Why?" he asked.

Christian was equally direct.

"I've given *Charon* to Baxter. You take over the new trawler in a week."

Cater's shoulders climbed upwards to around his ears.

"I sail in *Charon*, or I'll sail in one of Northbound's ships."

Christian looked at him steadily without replying for a few moments. Northbound was a struggling company owning ancient, decrepit trawlers which barely scratched a living from the over-fished Dogger or off Rockall, that lonely sentinal off the western Scottish islands.

"I believe you would, too," Christian said ultimately.

Cater nodded. "Nothing surer."

"You didn't hesitate to take *Charon* when she was a new ship. What has she got that this new one hasn't? You could take any trawler to sea and make a top figure," Christian grinned. "Even one of Northbound's sea-going scrap-heaps."

Cater nodded again. "I could. Do I get *Charon*?" He doggedly stayed on his set course.

Christian drummed on the table. This could be a battle of strong wills with the weight in his favour. He owned the ships. Skippers went and did what he wanted and if one gibed there were a dozen eager men waiting to step into their sea-boots. Finally he got to his feet and walked to the window. He leaned against the window-frame and looked out over the dock. There

she lay, proud bow rising, a new coat of paint hiding the scars she had collected, still as much a ship as the day he watched her brand new, waiting to meet her natural element, her foe and yet her ally, the sea.

"All right. You take *Charon*, Baxter gets the new one."

Cater relaxed and his shoulders dropped from their pugnacious heights as he joined Christian at the window.

"I've got to do it," Cater started to talk softly as he looked out at his ship. "I know all the stories going around. I hear them, so does my wife. We have a bit of a to-do, nothing more than other ships get, but, it's *Charon's* luck. Always *Charon's* luck. If Baxter took her to sea, and nothing happened what would be said?" He answered his own question. "They'd say it was me." He turned passionately to Christian. "It would be Cater's hoodoo. When I took out the new ship all the port would be watching and waiting. If a man jammed a finger, or we lost a trawl, it would be Cater's luck. I've got to lick it on that ship." His finger stabbed out towards her. "And I will."

Christian turned away and moved towards his desk. Momentarily he allowed an arm to rest on Cater's shoulder as he passed.

"And if Baxter had an accident, or lost a trawl . . . or anything else on *Charon* and you had a trouble-free run on the new one the hoodoo—if such a thing exists, would not be yours," he said.

Cater spun towards him. "I'll lick it and not by passing it over to another man. I'll lick it my way."

Christian shrugged. "All right, Ted, best of luck." As Cater walked towards the door Christian checked him. "One thing." His eyes were chilled, steady and fixed on Cater. "Not too much of the. . . ." His hand and forearm as if in a drinking motion. Cater opened his mouth to reply as he stood with his hand on the door-knob. "We'll not argue. You know what I mean, Ted. It doesn't help," Christian concluded.

For a few long seconds Cater stood, his eyes locked with the other man's.

"All right."

As Cater passed the secretary he met her smile with a faint

grin. "Like a mill-pond," he said. "Save the squall for when Baxter comes in."

Her chin tilted, "It will still be mill-pond then. When do you sail, Skipper?"

"Tomorrow, afternoon tide." He turned at the door and added, "In *Charon*."

Christian was not the only one who had noticed that Cater was drinking more than was his usual practice. His wife found that on their occasional car trips out to a country club or hotel he would be in an abstract mood, talking little. Whereas he would at one time have taken one or two drinks before dinner and not more than two afterwards now he drank a succession of large whiskies. By no stretch of imagination could he be described as drunk, but the amount he did take made him aggressive. Once or twice on the drive home she had heard the tyres squeal protestingly as he cornered at speed. It happened not often, but the occasions were enough to disturb her. Even when they were at home on a fireside night he would sit staring into the fire reaching automatically for his glass. When it was empty he would frown slightly at the interruption caused to his line of thought, pour out a generous portion and would relapse into deep thought again. Until the bottle was empty.

Nobby Clarke and Fudge noted it too. Fudge from the empty bottles he found in the skipper's berth. Nobby by his sense of smell and Cater's unusual aggressiveness.

This last phase manifested itself gradually. Nobby, Fudge and some of the seamen who had sailed several trips with Cater noticed that on occasions, usually when they were on the fishing grounds, that Cater would disappear from the bridge for half an hour or so while the trawl was down. When it was hauled and the catch inspected Cater would lean over the bridge talking loudly to Nobby, or any other deck-hand who was near. The contrast to his usual somewhat reticent manner was most marked.

Cater would not have admitted it to a single living soul but he was beset by a nagging fear which was never more than skin deep beneath the surface. At the moment of sailing he would

find himself watching men narrowly, watching for some momentary carelessness which would lead to a slight mishap.

The passage to his selected fishing ground would leave him in comparative peace. With the exception of Fudge and the engine-room crew there was little activity, the men were conserving their energy for the actual trawling.

Once fishing, the nagging fear would return. A man would slip, curse heartily, and would carry on. But Cater would feel a momentary lurch of his heart as he saw the slip. Almost inevitably he found his thoughts dwelling on other simple mishaps which had become magnified far beyond normal and were added to the legend as disasters.

It was then he found that a couple of large whiskies aided him to put on an aggressive attitude towards his fear. He found that he faced up to any minor slip with a to-hell-with-it feeling. And he found it a comforting refuge. The large whiskies became more frequent. He started taking them before he began fishing, continued with them until they became his constant comfort and help. Not at any time could he have been described as drunk, or even drink taken in the Scottish neatly put definition.

Whisky to him had become a drug, and like all drugs, constant use demanded an ever increasing application to obtain the desired and required effect.

And it was whisky which brought about his undoing. Whisky allied to a simple mishap in the beginning.

Few trawlermen will bother to splice a wire rope. Some of them can, but in the main wire splicing is left to specialists ashore. When anything parts, they employ a spare. But Nobby Clarke prided himself on his ability to splice and on an outward trip he set about fashioning a heavy wire bridle with the help of one of the young deck-hands.

Cater was leaning over the bridge front, as *Charon*, a white bone in her teeth, slipped along over a glassy sea leaving behind her a ruled edged wake as far back as the eye could see.

Below the bridge Nobby and his assistant wrestled with a stout and refractory wire rope. A small coil of it, like a half-wound clock spring writhed around and rapped Nobby smartly

over the knuckles breaking the skin on two of them and ripping deeper into the flesh on the first knuckle of his index finger. Nobby cursed in heartfelt language and sucked his fingers several times.

Finally he finished the job, coiled away the completed bridle and looked up at the bridge.

"Feel like a jar of tea?" he asked.

"Huh huh," Cater grunted agreement and Nobby rolled away to the galley.

"Let me see those knuckles," Cater said later on the bridge after he and Nobby had dealt faithfully with the mugs of strong tea.

Nobby extended his hand. The abrasions had by now acquired a clearly defined frame of grime, a black line around the small red wounds.

"It's nowt," Nobby said and sucked the wounds once more. "If young ham hand had held on to the bight when I told him it wouldn't have happened. I'll slap a drop of iodine on it by and by."

But he didn't and Cater forgot to remind him.

The weather broke down somewhat by the time they reached their fishing grounds off Bear Island and they had to snatch short periods in which to shoot their trawl in between half gales.

Tempers became frayed as the discomfort increased. In the cold, grey half light of the dawn of a wild morning Nobby ducked under the icy, dripping cod end of the trawl, timed its swing and pulled at the complicated knot which held it closed.

It failed to slip and as the cod, heavy and bulging with fish swung slowly across the streaming deck Nobby hung on to it grimly. He wrestled with it for a few seconds and eventually got it clear. Cater saw him reel away from the cascade of lashing fish and put out a hand towards a rail to steady himself.

Above the conglomerate of noise, moaning wind, snarling sea and the creaks and groans of the ship and gear Cater heard Nobby curse. He saw him standing, legs wide apart, nursing his hand in the crook of the elbow of the other arm.

"What's up?" Cater called sharply.

"Nowt," Nobby shouted back. "Hand is a bit painful and I hit it against the rail."

Cater waited until the hands were busy dealing with the fish.

"Come up with that hand. Let me look at it," he called.

It appalled him when he saw the condition of it.

The back of the hand was shapeless, swollen into a tight, angry half round of purple shining skin. The minor abrasions seemed to have healed over into small scars but from the knuckle of the index finger to the wrist the skin was deep red.

"How long's it been like this? What the hell are you thinking of?" Cater grated. He pressed none to gently and Nobby grimaced and rolled his head.

"Easy Skipper, I just hit this a belt on the rail."

"And I've just pressed it lightly and you're yowling."

The elementary facilities available to Cater failed to cope with the spreading poison in the man's arm. It progressed steadily but alarmingly, until the whole arm up to the shoulder was swollen to such an extent that Cater was afraid the skin would burst.

He searched long and closely but could find no focal point he could lance. Time and again he lifted the small scab on the knuckle, squeezed until a little discharge came from it, but the effect on the arm was nil. From the guidance in the first-aid book he turned on Fudge's advice to more homely poultices, put on as hot as Nobby could bare them.

Finally Cater made a decision.

"I'm going to put you ashore for treatment," he said curtly.

Nobby stormed without avail.

"If that lot gets to spreading through your whole body anything could happen . . . anything," Cater answered. "A doctor can fix it in no time."

He turned *Charon's* head south-west.

On the morning of the third day his course converged with

that of another trawler. Cater closed her. She was a trawler belonging to the same firm. They lay a few yards apart, engines stopped, rolling slowly on the glassy but steady swell.

The skipper of the *Circe* came over, and with Cater examined Nobby's arm. With pursed lips he shook his head. Back in Cater's berth he amplified.

"Looks ugly, doesn't it? It's a job for a doctor."

Cater slowly nodded agreement.

"How you been doing?" *Circe's* skipper asked.

"About 1,500 kit at the moment. We were into 'em all right when his arm got worse."

"Tell you what, I'm full and bound home. I'll take him along. If it get's worse I'll get a doctor aboard at Hammerfest. If it stays as it is I'll run him right home."

Cater narrowed his eyes. It would be better that way. The *Circe*, homeward bound, would seldom be far away from skilled medical treatment. Down the Norwegian coast he could always signal in for a doctor. After leaving that he had the Shetlands and Orkneys, Aberdeen and home.

"Right. I'll get him over."

Nobby, drowsy from the simple and semi-effective pain-killing drugs that Cater had given him protested only mildly and in a few minutes the respective ships drew apart. *Charon* retracing her course, *Circe* bound south and home.

"Give me the news on R.T.?" Cater asked as the ships parted.

But it was five days afterwards before he was given any information. A trawler arriving at the fishing ground relayed a message to him. She had passed *Circe*, had been told the news and was given a message for Cater.

Clarke's arm had got no worse and *Circe's* skipper was confident of getting him into their home port.

Cater smiled for the first time in a week.

Charon slid slowly and smoothly alongside the quay wall ten days later. Scarcely was she all fast before Cater, dressed in his strictly functional blue suit stepped on to the quay.

Christian saw him at once.

"Nice work, Ted. We've caught the cream of the market again. How did the trip go altogether?"

Cater shrugged. "Patchy to begin with. Then it bucked up. I lost some time transferring Nobby to *Circe*. But I made it up. How did he shape when he got in?"

Christian drummed on his desk with his finger-tips before answering.

"He was in a bad way. The last two days must have been hell for him. We had an ambulance waiting and whipped him off to hospital. It was touch and go."

"Ambulance? Couldn't he walk?"

"Walk! He'd been in a coma for two days. *Circe's* skipper thought he was sleeping. The doctor's opinion was that four hours more would have seen him gone."

"How . . . where is he now?"

Christian smiled. "In hospital, playing hell and running the nurses ragged. He's. . ."

"So he's all right. He's over the worst . . . ?"

"Tough as an ox, that lad. It was his toughness which pulled him through. After the operation he started picking up almost right away."

"Operation . . . ?"

Christian looked fixedly at Cater.

"You'd better see him, Ted. I've fixed it so that we can go in any time. I wanted him to have a room there, but he prefers the ward. Go'n see him."

Cater stuck doggedly to the main theme in his mind.

"What operation was there? Did they have to cut his arm about much?"

"They cut it off."

It was harsh, flat, like a crack of a whip and Cater jerked as if a whip had flayed him across the face. His mouth opened, shut again. He swallowed.

Christian stood up.

"Go and see him," he said, gently ushering Cater to the door. "You'll find he's full of beans."

Cater checked Christian as he started to open the door.

"It's his right arm. He'll be. . ."

"He'll be all right. I'll see he's all right. He's in Dogger ward."

Christian opened the door and Cater walked through it. For the first time he walked past the secretary without a look or a word. Christian watched him go through the outer office and out into the yard. He turned to the girl.

"Get me Mrs. Cater on the telephone. Ring up the hospital, tell 'em Cater's coming along. Then I want you for some letters. Bring the address of that convalescent home with you."

The tang of disinfectant and other unidentified smells slightly stung Cater's nose as he was taken to the ward.

The trim, rustling, white clad staff-nurse halted at the door and smiled.

"Fourth bed from the end on the window side," she said. "And PLEASE don't argue with him about Grimsby Town football club. He's threatened to wreck the ward twice on that topic. We've banned it now."

Cater walked down the ward, his heart slightly pounding, towards the bed indicated.

Clarke was half sitting, half lying with his back towards the door. As Cater drew near he could see that the man was reading. On the bed was a small wooden reading-desk. As he drew level he saw Nobby's lips moving silently as he coped with the written word. He stopped by the bed-foot and Clarke saw him from the corner of his eye.

"Gaw' blimy look who's here." Clarke struggled over to a sitting-up position. "When did y' get in?"

"Just over an hour ago." Cater moved around to the side of the bed and momentarily struggled with an almost instinctive movement of his right hand. Of course, Nobby could not shake hands. Irresistably his eyes were drawn to Clarke's right shoulder, still obviously heavily padded and bandaged.

"Lost a swinger," Nobby said with studied carelessness.

For the first time Cater spoke.

"Oh, hell," he whispered. "Oh hell."

"Bit of bad luck," Nobby said, his narrowed eyes on his

skipper. "What was the trip like?" He went off at a tangent.

The first impacting meeting was over. Cater gradually thawed and the conversation became technical and animated.

Eventually Cater picked up the book through which Nobby was labouring when he arrived. It was a Guide for Skippers.

"Got a lot of time for reading now," Nobby said. "I know most of that, when I come to read it."

Cater nodded. "All you have to do it to show the examiner that you know it."

Nobby shrugged his right shoulder slightly, grimaced momentarily with pain, and fingered the book.

"The old swinger gone won't stop me," he said firmly. A grin spread over his face. "Nelson only had one arm. He was short an eye, too."

The grin changed to a scowl. "Maybe somebody else will be short an eye or two when I get around." The tones were unnecessarily loud and Cater looked at him in surprise. "Me and a gent are going to get together when I'm up and about. Grimsby Town, huh." Nobby infused a wealth of contempt into the last forcible ejaculation.

"I warned you about talking football," a severe voice said over Cater's shoulder. He turned. The staff-nurse was standing behind him, a twinkle in her eyes denying the severity of her voice.

"He and the man two beds along come nearly to throwing things at each other when they start on football. When they talk fishing it's bad enough, but . . . football. . ."

"What's he done?" Cater asked with a smile.

"He's from Grimsby," Nobby scowled.

"So am I. Remember, keep off football," the nurse said firmly and moved away. "Anyway, he's asleep."

Nobby watched her walk down the ward.

"Well, what do you think of that. She's from Grimsby. She looked a nice girl, too."

Cater chuckled. "Lots of nice people come from Grimsby. And your fighting days are over, Nobby me lad. He'd mow you down, and you with only one arm."

He found it cost him no effort to say that out loud.

Nobby grinned. "I got a chance. He's only got one leg. It'll be a nice fight. Hst." He dropped suddenly to a conspiratorial whisper. "Didn't think of bringing a flagon with you, did you? One pint a day, I get. Half midday and half at night. It's a flea-bite to a thirsty man."

Cater promised to call in again before sailing. It was a promise he failed to keep.

He was smiling when he reached his trim home. When his wife heard him arrive she fought against the flutter in her breast, knowing that he had called in at the hospital. One glance was enough to reassure her.

"Mr. Christian has got plans for Nobby," she said later. "Nobby's idea is to swot up enough for a ticket. I've loaned him some of your books. . . ."

"That's where he got them, was it? More than I could do. I could never keep his nose down to them."

She laughed, a little trilling sound.

"Woman's wiles instead of the mailed fist."

"A mailed fist is something Nobby badly wants at the moment. He is planning a scrap with a one-legged lad from Grimsby a few beds away. They can't keep away from football in general and Grimsby Town in particular."

"And neither of them know that the nurse encourages the argument because it keeps the entire ward interested. If she put them alongside each other they would still merely argue."

"I don't know. Nobby is an inflammable lad."

"And that nurse knows her job. And knows men."

A little later she asked, "What shall we do tonight? There isn't a decent show or film on in the whole town."

They decided on a run into the country in the car, dinner at an hotel or a country club and home early to their own fireside.

But in the hotel malignant fate waited in ambush. And, as is so often the case when fate wishes to deal a hammer blow it first touches lightly, delicately, like a blacksmith tapping the spot on the soft, malleable metal before hitting it a blow which will completely alter its shape for ever.

Cater and his wife sat at a table on the fringe of the small dance floor. Neither spoke, they had reached that stage in which it was not necessary to make conversation. Quite idly they looked at the people on the dance floor and occasionally their eyes would meet and they would exchange a brief smile, more a matter of a warmth of the eyes rather than any movement of the face muscles.

The compact little dance band struck up a tango tune and the piano accordionist stepped down from the dais and circulated among the dancers playing his wild, blood-stirring tangos as he moved around.

Cater leaned forward towards his wife.

"I wonder what Nobby will do with his squeeze box now?" he said.

She looked at him sharply for a moment or two but he seemed relaxed.

"I expect he'll find a way of playing it."

A brief smile parted his lips.

"I've been watching that man play. It's a two-handed job all right. Still, Nobby is a lad with. . . ."

A noisy party blustering through the curtained doorway, clipped his sentence short as he turned to survey it.

"Oh, lord, look who's arrived."

She followed his eyes.

The party was made up of three men and three women. The men she spared just a moment on in survey. The women came in for longer and more critical assessment. They were expensively but flashily dressed, wearing far too much jewellery and what there was of it was wrong.

"Bill Jordon and his missus. Spike Mason and the barmaid from the Queen's and Slasher Mallory. The woman with him I don't know. Can that lot shift drink when they get going." He gave her a rapid thumb-nail sketch of the people in the party.

"Spike and Slasher had tiptop trips and are celebrating. They don't usually get out of town this far."

"Are they Christian's skippers?"

Cater chuckled.

"He wouldn't touch 'em with a barge-pole. Their names stink with every 'bogy man' from Cromarty Firth to Iceland. They've all been pinched a few times."

"'Bogy man'?" Her eyebrows raised.

"Fishery protection ships."

"And don't you ever see the-er-Bogy Man?"

"Every trip, but they don't find me fishing inshore with lights out. It's daft anyway." He poured out a glass of wine for her and finished the last of his whisky. "Any chump can clean up a known breeding ground and get away with it for a trip or two. But it doesn't pay in the long run. They get your tally, and it spoils the ground."

She listened intently. From such fragments she learned much of his way of life, of the problems and difficulties of trawling, of the science of hunting and catching fish.

He gestured with his head.

"More often than not they'll use up half a trip trawling blind then take a chance inshore to fill up in the time."

The party had reached a table and were noisily debating their order before passing it to a waiter standing patiently near. Finally they sent the man on his errand and arranged themselves around a table. It was obvious that they had been drinking before they arrived.

"... and spend it like asses," Cater murmured.

"Come again?"

He explained and she chuckled.

The gusty laughter from the party stopped suddenly as one of the men saw Cater and his wife. All their heads came together for a moment then one of them waved. All the eyes were on Cater and it was apparent that he was the subject of their immediate conversation.

The waiter arrived with a tray laden with bottles and glasses and disposed them around the table. Mallory spoke to him and glanced over to Cater. The waiter inclined his head and walked over to Cater.

"The gentleman says 'will you join them in a drink', sir."

Cater shook his head briefly.

"No thanks. We'll be going shortly." His lips were tight.

"Damn cheek," he said as the waiter returned to the group.

Mallory stood up, said something to Mason which raised a swift gust of laughter and crossed the room to Cater and his wife.

"Hullo, Cater," he said. His eyes were glittering and a mirthless smile played around his mouth. "C'mon. Have a drink. One record-breaking skipper to another."

He raised the glass in his hand and looked tauntingly at Cater over the rim.

Cater's hands, resting on the table, clenched until the knuckles showed ivory white against the darker skin.

"I've already said 'no'. We're going at. . . ."

"We've changed our minds. We'll have a quick one with you. Make mine gin and lime. Ted will have a whisky." Her voice was cool, raised slightly above normal pitch. Cater looked swiftly at her, half smothered an angry exclamation. Her chin was tilted upwards, the faintest suggestion of a smile hovered around her mouth.

What ever it was Mallory had in mind, possibly a bit of old-fashioned baiting at Cater's expense, her interruption put him completely out of tempo. Rather stolidly, the impish gleam gone from his eyes, he looked from one to another as if suspecting that somehow they were jointly making a fool of him and his offer.

Cater had not moved from the moment of her interjection except to allow his eyes to slip sideways towards his wife. It was a momentary move, a quick flick and they were back again boring into Mallory's.

Mrs. Cater leaned back slightly and slowly. She could almost feel the tension, almost smell the pepper-like acrid emanation of angry males both hovering on the fringe of physical violence.

Mallory's shoulders dropped gradually and the mirthless grin made tentative appearances, scarcely more than twitches of the corners of his mouth.

Finally he said "That's fine. C'mon join us. We're having a great time. C'mon." He half turned towards his party. "You know Mason, don't you?"

"Yes." Cater clipped it off short so that it became almost "yep".

"Well, come over to the table. Hi, waiter, hi. A large gin and lime and a large scotch. Put them on my table."

"Bring them here, please," Mrs. Cater arrested the waiter as he spun on his heel. Her voice, still slightly above normal pitch, still level, had a decisive, metallic authoritative ring.

"Yes, madam."

While the waiter was carrying out his order Mallory tried to bridge the gap with a genial comment or two.

"Me and Mason had all the luck this trip," he said. "We struck 'em ten fathoms thick. Couldn't put a finger wrong. And to top it all he had a double come up at Doncaster. Put his bet on three weeks ago. Know what he backed?" He waited briefly then went on. "Know what he backed? Sun Fish and North Easter. Five quid double he had and it came up. Seventy-five to one the bookie paid."

Cater had not moved during the recital. Neither had his wife.

Mallory felt the situation was slipping out of his grasp. He had come over to them with the intention of riling Cater, to 'take a rise out of them' as he had put it to his small party.

The arrival of the waiter with the drinks on a tray provided him with a brief opening which, he felt would direct events nearer to his heart's desire.

"Here we are," he said heartily. "Bottoms up. One record-breaking skipper to another. Had your usual luck this trip, Cater?"

Cater took the glass, held it in his hands, glinted at it briefly, glanced at his wife and tossed it back in one swift motion.

"Waiter." He almost barked the word. As the man stood near him Cater looked at his wife with raised eyebrows.

"Not for me," she interpreted the look and declined another drink.

"Two large whiskies. Bring them to this table."

Cater clipped the words.

"Bring them over to our table. C'mon, we'll make a party

of it. Me and Mason's gun'll under with money. We'll have some champagne. C'mon."

Mallory grasped Cater's arm. Cater stood up and shook off the grasp. With one downward pointed finger he indicated to the waiter that the drinks were to be brought to his table.

"Here," he said briefly.

In a matter of moments the man was back with the tray, but in those few moments she sensed again the rising heat of antagonism. For a brief while she wondered what to do to cool it. Swiftly she appraised and rejected several possibilities. The initiative was taken from her.

Cater took his glass in his hand, raised it.

"A record-breaking skipper drinks to another . . . skipper."

The pause and the omission were deadly, seething, and Mallory's face flushed. His drink stopped half way to his lips.

Cater put his glass down with a sharp thump.

"Let's go," he said taking his wife's arm.

They were threading their way through the tables and were half way to the door before Mallory recovered. His shoulders hunched up around his ears, his chin was out-thrust, but his mental reflexes were not so swift as his instinctive actions. Had Cater been within arms length his instinct would have made him lash out; would have brought a physical reaction. Verbally he was lost.

As Cater and his wife disappeared through the doorway Mallory walked slowly back to his party. He glowered momentarily at them. He had taken just enough drink to make him precariously poised between boisterous humour and equally boisterous pugnacity.

"She was willing," he said. "But he wasn't. 'Have a drink. One record-breaking skipper to another', I says to him. 'We'll drink to that' he says. She has a gin. 'Now we'll have another', he says. 'Then we'll be on our way'." He glowered again. "You saw him, didn't yer?"

"Yes, we saw him. Sit down. You're a couple of cables astern. Knock 'em back," Mason urged. "Couple 'a record-

breaking bastards . . . blokes . . ." he amended rapidly. "Me to you, and more records. Up she goes."

Glasses tilted and remained tilted until they were empty.

Outside in the forecourt of the hotel Cater and his wife sat in the car. He waited a few moments before switching on and starting his engine.

As he slipped into gear and the car moved gently away he said tersely:

"Next time I say I don't want to drink with anybody don't make me take one."

She made no reply.

He swung into the main road and the car was humming along before he spoke again.

"Why did you do it?"

She watched a car approach and pass before she answered.

"Because it was obvious that had you refused it would have led to. . . ." She nearly said 'a fight' but amended it. "To unpleasantness. It was easier, more diplomatic to take a drink and then leave."

"And have him brag around the port that he had been out drinking with Ted Cater and his wife. 'One record-breaking skipper to another'," he mimicked. "A man I ignore and dislike."

"Does it matter all that much?" she asked mildly.

"It does to me. He is one of the men who is always knocking at me, always jibing about Cater . . . and Cater's luck . . . and *Charon's* luck. I should have clipped him on the chin, or jammed his glass down his throat."

She chuckled. "Maybe he would have clipped you back and. . . ."

"Maybe he would have. And I. . . ."

"You sound, and act like Nobby Clarke. Did you want to fight . . . ? In there?"

Nobby Clarke! His mind slipped back swiftly to the man in hospital. The empty sleeve, the brave talk, 'Nelson was short an eye, too'. Back and back to the small graze which caused the trouble, back and back to the other men who had been injured who had died on *Charon*, or because of *Charon*.

A conglomeration of red and white lights appeared in the distance. As his thoughts travelled back along the track his foot went down harder on the accelerator. The lights seemed to swoop towards them.

"Steady, Ted. You're touching sixty," she reproved.

"I'll damn well touch eighty if I want to."

Suddenly he jammed on the brakes, swiftly changed down as the lights came right ahead. There were the neon signs and white lights of a garish hotel. Savagely he swung the car off the road into the parking place.

"Not in here, surely?" she protested. It was a flashy place much frequented by younger trawlermen and their girl friends at times when they were in the money. From inside they could hear a buzz of loud voices punctuated by a piano being mercilessly pounded. Above it all a raucous voice was singing out of tune.

"Yes, in here. Let 'em all see a record-breaking skipper drink," he said harshly. "Let 'em see Smasher Cater drink with the best. Smasher Cater. That's what they call me behind my back. Ship 'em and make 'em break records or smash 'em."

"Please, Ted."

"You coming in?" He was out of the car and was holding the door open for her.

She shook her head. "Anywhere else, yes. In here, no."

He laughed, a hard, barking mirthless sound.

"In here."

"No."

He slammed the door and strode through the brightly lighted entrance, into the chromium-plated lounge and up to the small bar.

"Large scotch."

While he was being served he looked belligerently around the room. There was not a familiar face there. Not one person to whom he could nod, although he knew that to the men, and to some of the women he was known. Heads went together. Lips moved in whispers.

He tilted the glass and emptied it in one swift move.

"Another."

The bar attendant eyed him shrewdly and Cater intercepted the look.

"Anything wrong?"

The attendant screwed up his eyes for a moment.

"Nothing. But I've got to keep my wits about me. Got the licence to think of. 'Large whisky' you said?"

He was on his third whisky when he became aware of somebody standing near him. She had on too much make-up. Her mouth was a red, lavish slash, mascara dripped heavily from the ends of her eyelashes. Her eyebrows had been clumsily plucked and above them pencilled in lines reached nearly to her ears.

As their eyes met she signalled, blatantly. A hand travelled to vaguely adjust her hair. She twisted her body so that he caught a line of tightly costumed buttocks.

"Lonely, Sailorman?" she simpered.

"Yes."

"Well. A lonely girl and a lonely sailorman. . . ." She twisted an empty glass and looked provocatively at him.

"I like it that way. Have a drink?" he offered. He turned to the depraved but efficient psychologist presiding over the bar. "Fill it," he said crisply.

"How did you know I was a sailor?" he asked.

She lifted the glass, one finger delicately poised and held away from it. She changed from one foot to another which gave her body, she hoped, a seductive sway.

"I can usually tell. Besides, some friends of mine know you. I even know your name," she added.

Cater lifted his glass, tossed the remnants swiftly down his throat, shrugged and walked out without another word.

He expected some remonstrance, some comment. There was none. He swung the car from the forecourt of the hotel, pressed his foot down until the needle of the speedometer danced around sixty-five. Still no comment. She maintained the icy silence until he had put the car away and they were standing in their small lounge.

He crossed to the sideboard and poured himself out a drink. "Have one?" he asked shortly.

"No. And I think you've had enough . . . and done enough tonight."

He tipped his glass, put it back with a slight thud on the sideboard.

"I'll drink as much as I want, with whom I like when I like," he rasped.

The storm broke. The calm, maintained through the long drive home had lost nothing in its intensity in the period of waiting. With wild words, savage phrases, illogical sentences she flayed him. Twice he tried to stem the flow.

"Shut up." The words came like a crack of a whip.

The torrent sped onwards. Malignant fate tapped and tapped with its little hammer, sighting and measuring before starting the heavier blows.

Again, "Shut up." This time he was combating near hysteria.

She accused him stridently of the very things people whispered against him. Blamed him for the mishaps which had attached themselves to him and his ship like a noisome legend.

He took three strides across the room, took her by the shoulders and shook her. Momentarily she paused. Then her lips curled.

"Smasher Cater. Well, go on. Add me to your smashes."

Smack. She stepped back and her hand flew to her face. Across the white flesh the imprints of his hand were rapidly reddening. For a few seconds she stood like that. Once her knuckles gently massaged her stinging cheek. Slowly his head dropped as through the whisky fumes he realized the enormity of what he had done. He heard her move, heard the door slam and heard her feet as she flew upstairs. The bedroom door slammed. Later he tapped on the door, called twice, tried to open it. It was locked.

Through the night he sat slumped in a chair in the lounge occasionally visiting the bottle of whisky. As daylight greyed the outside he left, went to an hotel.

He was whisky laden when *Charon* sailed. He remained whisky laden throughout the trip. A trip which was a nightmare to his crew of sullen deck-hands. He was whisky laden when with filled fish-holds he received a message from Christian diverting him to Fleetwood. He was whisky laden when he sailed around Cape Wrath and down the Minches.

Ben Christian replaced the phone; picked up another.

"Fuller? Come in."

Fuller, his superintendent, a grizzled, sea-hardened man took the indicated chair.

"I want you to fly to Glasgow this afternoon," Christian said. "Cater has put *Charon* ashore at the top end of Islay Sound. I'm waiting for a full report from the salvage people now. If I get it in time I'll phone it to you in Glasgow."

Fuller heaved himself upright with a grunt.

"What's the damage, briefly?" He looked at his chief. "Was it thick weather?"

"Clear night. No wind. Damage not known, but briefly it seems not much." He rustled some papers on his desk. "He appears to have picked the one sandy bit on the point and rammed her on it."

Fuller nodded. "I'll away. Plane is ordered I take it?"

Christian nodded.

Fuller continued. "I'll get it all from Cater I expect." He moved towards the door, nodded briefly and left.

Christian allowed the last sentence to circulate in his mind for a few moments.

"I doubt it," he said to himself and leaned forward to read the brief notes phoned him by the salvage firm. "It seems the second hand had the bridge when she struck. He reports the skipper was in his berth drunk. When our representative boarded the ship the skipper was unable to see him."

Charon was not badly damaged and with a salvage vessel in solicitous attention she was steamed to the Clyde in the early hours of a September morning.

As the bustle and turmoil of getting her alongside subsided, a

few hundred miles to the east Hitler's bombers snarled through the first grey dawn towards Warsaw and his Panzers rolled mightily over the frontier.

Once again the lights were going out over Europe. Once again the world was going to war.

The inquiry was short. Men had greater things to think of, bigger things to do. The evidence was conclusive. Skipper Cater had undoubtedly been drunk when his ship was steaming through the tortuous Sounds and had remained drunk when the first attempts were made to salvage the ship.

So, the inquiry was short and the justice was summary. His skipper's ticket was suspended until such times as the necessary authority saw fit to restore it.

Ted Cater was not present to hear the decision.

In a back room of a boarding-house near King's Cross station he sat down and wrote two letters. One was to his wife. The other to Ben Christian.

To Christian he wrote:

It seems I've let you down. Had war not started I would have taken what they ladled out, asked you for a job as a deck-hand on one of your ships, and would have come back the hard way. I'm not blaming anybody. But get rid of that ship. I don't know how to put it into words enough to convince you, but she's a killer, an evil ship. She'll even get you before she finishes.

To his wife his letter ran:

I can almost hear you saying it from here, and maybe you are right. Make no mistake. Had things been normal, no war, then I would have taken it with my chin up. I would have gone back to sea on deck, earning it like a horse. . . . Instead, this morning I report for the Navy. I joined yesterday.

His closing sentences came near to being a plea.

At the moment I'm all muddled up (he wrote). I think it will be

better if I keep away from you for a while until I get things straightened out in my mind. So long as I know you are there, and you are all right I won't feel too bad. When I get the kinks out, I'll write again. By the same post I have written to the bank transferring the account to you. Look after yourself.

He started to write 'Love'. But crossed out the 'Lo' and finished it plainly, 'Ted'.

It was that letter which took her to see Ben Christian.

"Come in, Mrs. Cater," he said, rising from his desk to place a chair for her. "I thought it better that you came to see me rather than talk on the telephone."

When she was seated he walked over to the window and stood looking out over the docks.

"I've heard from Ted, too." He broke his silence and turned towards her. "Nothing much in his letter that you don't know. But. . . ." He reached over to his desk and picked up Cater's letter. "See what he says about *Charon*."

She read the short note and when she had finished she shrugged.

"He must have been mad." As she spoke she looked up at Christian. "He always laughed at the stories about *Charon*. But in the last few months he seemed to be drinking too much."

"Yes?" It was a half-veiled interrogative.

"He seemed to think it was something personal between he and *Charon*. The night before he sailed on that last trip he had been drinking too much. We had . . . had a bit of a spate. He. . . ." The memory of the slap across the face silenced her for a moment. She dropped her head and bit on her lower lip. "We had that spate and he left."

Christian gestured with his arm towards the window. It was an invitation to her to join him.

"Look," he said. "Half a dozen of the biggest and best trawlers in the world and any one of them was his for the asking. He could have named his ship and I would have given her to him."

In silence they stood looking out.

Christian continued: "In three weeks they will be armed and converted into patrol trawlers—*Charon* is going the same way. Ted might have commanded one of them, or another."

"And now the fool has joined the Navy as a seaman," she said sharply.

Christian was surprised at the sharpness of her tones and sought for a reason and believed he had found it.

"Does it make a great deal . . . a lot of difference . . . er . . . financially."

She shook her head. "No, there's a fair amount in the bank. You know what Ted earned, even in the hard days. No, he's fixed that all right."

She stepped forward so that the light window framed her and her head was slightly in front of his shoulder.

For a few moments they stood in silence looking out of the window. Gradually he became aware of the faint but definite perfume she had used. He did not know it, but it was Chanel Number Five which Cater had ordered for her.

He looked down first at the smart little hat she wore poised at an absurd but attractive angle on her head. Briefly he dwelt on the soft fair hair escaping from beneath the hat. The line of the neck from her hair to where it disappeared beneath the collar of the soft cream blouse made him catch his breath. HER neck had been like that, beautifully, seductively curved. Smooth, soft to the touch, soft to the lips. When he had kissed HER on that curve she would breathe deeply, tremulously and her body would move gently, rhythmically. SHE would turn, slip into his arms, would hold him tightly for a few moments before surrendering to an engulfing storm of passion.

He swayed closer towards the woman at his shoulder. His breath moved the stray tendrils of hair slightly. His lips parted. She turned swiftly, possibly it was age-old intuition, older than reason, as old as instinct. She read the message in his eyes, saw the white-hot desire surging to the surface. The equally age-old warning she tossed to one side with scarcely a thought. Almost imperceptibly she swayed towards him and in a second she found herself being crushed in his powerful arms, found herself

being smothered almost beyond breathing by his seeking lips. Finally he lifted his head and looked out of the window seeing neither ships nor docks, thinking neither of Cater nor *Charon*.

"I'll pick you up in the car tonight," he said thickly.

She nodded. And her thoughts were neither on Ted Cater, her husband, nor on *Charon*.

That night she became his mistress.

The lieutenant R.N. accepted the proffered pink gin, propped himself on the mantelpiece in the ward-room—until recently a seaside hotel lounge—and sampled his drink.

"A fair lot, sir, very fair indeed. Most of them have had some R.N.R. training, and, thank God, all of them have been to sea."

The commander in charge of training thumbed the glowing pile at the top of his pipe bowl and nodded slowly.

"Good, good. There's a man I want you to keep an eye on. His name is Cater. He'll ship a leading seaman's badge in a week or two. He should make a good coxswain for a trawler."

The lieutenant pursed his lips and nodded agreement.

"I've heard some of his background from the P.O.s. He's been what they call a top skipper. Some of the men tried taking a rise out of him. He cut that short in double quick time. I gather in his skippering days he was a bit of a . . . a . . ."

"Implying that his parents dispensed with the formality of marriage," the commander cut in drily. "I can see him ahead to Petty Officer in this expanding Navy. Mine's a pink again." He accepted the drink. "What's his trouble? Women and wine? Women and gambling? Women and money—too much of both?"

"I'll find out, sir. But I don't think it's women and anything in particular. Not even women."

"Then he's an oddity. Could even be officer material."

"Bit sweeping, aren't you, sir?" The lieutenant concentrated on his drink. "After all, women are. . . ."

"How long have you been married?" It was a rising interrogative.

"Five weeks, sir."

"The prosecution rests. Now, can we find a four for a rubber of bridge? And keep your eye on that man Cater."

"Yes, sir."

BOOK II

CHAPTER VIII

LIEUTENANT ROY JEFF, R.N.R., late junior officer in the Union Castle line, looked up as there came a double tap at the door of his cabin.

"Ship's company mustered on the foredeck, sir."

"Very well, Number One, carry on."

Jeff stubbed out a cigarette in the temporary ash-tray, the lid of a small tin, and breathed deeply. This was it. He as commanding officer of the newly commissioned Asdic trawler H.M.S. *Charon* was about to meet his ship's company in its entirety for the first time.

For nearly a fortnight he had been standing by her, living ashore in a hotel while the dockyard men completed their task of turning this maritime ploughshare into a sharp-edged sword.

The first impact of his appointment was resentment.

"A trawler. Good God."

Jeff, product of Conway, junior officer on a liner, had never trod the deck of a ship of less than 10,000 tons except for a few months in his R.N.R. training period when he had served, in peacetime, on a destroyer. Most of that time had been served in harbour except for occasional showing-the-flag trips at prominent regattas around the coast, and a quarterly shoot of four full calibre projectiles.

When war began and he donned the twisted rings of the R.N.R. he hoped for a cruiser or armed merchant cruiser, was prepared to accept the harder worked destroyer existence, in either event it would be as watch-keeping officer.

"A trawler, in command. Oh death, where is thy sting?"

Jeff had never even been within half a mile of a trawler

although he had cursed them fluently many times, particularly when on watch at night abeam of Finisterre where they seemed to be in shoals.

"What are they like, these trawler jobs?" he asked another officer as he travelled up to the port to stand by and take over command.

"First-class sea boats, hard on the guts, little bastards in a heavy sea, and. . . ."

"I mean accommodation. What is there? I have a number one and another sub. Where do we live?"

The question was dismissed airily. "Oh, all pig in together. There is some sort of accommodation aft I believe. How big is your crew?"

"Forty-two. What sort of job will she have? A kind of anti-sub. patrol I take it?"

The oracle concurred, even elaborated.

"You'll lie alongside the quay until some ship lets out a bleat that she is being chased and attacked. Then you dash forth, sink the submarine, rescue the ship, come back, collect the medals, marry the owner's daughter. . . . Bob's your uncle. You're a made man. You're in the money."

Jeff chuckled momentarily at the extravagant recital.

"You lucky devil," he went on after a pause. "What wires did you pull to get on *Kantara*? I hoped for a job on an A.M.C. *Rawalpindi* is commissioning up here, too. Ah, well. Can't have everything, I suppose."

"You've got a command, old boy. Who knows, before this ruckus is over you'll have a sleeve full of gold and a full-sized cruiser. Remember me, won't you?"

The conversation lagged and they both lounged back in their corner seats lulled by the monotonous rattle of the train.

In the bustle at their destination they shook hands.

"When you are gathering medals spare a thought for me," the other officer said. "I expect it will be South American coast for us. South Atlantic is the happy hunting for the Hun raiders."

"Lucky devil. I will."

And they parted.

Jeff reported to the base, then went on to the dockyard to see his new command.

She was in an orderly shambles. Stout electric leads snaked all over the deck. Gusts of blue-white flames sputtered as men crouched over welding torches. Amidships a small grubby gnome pumped away at a portable forge occasionally reaching into the heart of the glow to seize a white-hot rivet which he tossed through an opening in which his lords and masters swung curiously shaped hammers.

Throughout the ship there was a clamour of hammering, sawing, shouting.

Jeff looked at the round gun-platform poised oddly on the foredeck. The gun, already in position was shrouded in a newly painted grey canvas cover. A blinding torch manipulated by a kneeling figure worked on the ready supply racks around the platform.

He saw an open door at deck level under the bridge and he walked in.

So, this was the accommodation. He was more than agreeably surprised. The cabin was considerably larger than the one allocated to junior officers even on luxury liners. All the fittings were chromium plated. Lights were judiciously placed either over the bunk, the broad six-feet long settee or the central table. There was another door in the berth and curiously he opened it.

"A bathroom." His lips shaped a soundless whistle.

From the short alleyway another stout metal-shod teak ladder led upwards to the bridge.

On top of the trawler's normal wheel-house he found an upper bridge, open to the sky, had been erected.

"This is something like it," he murmured as he stood in the front and looked around him. "This is Navy."

The layout was similar to that of the small, old-type destroyer on which he had done some of his pre-war training. Along the front a row of copper-mouthed voice pipes were fixed, their covers a patchy green with verdigris but promising a heartening shine under the industrious hands of a couple of men.

Behind them was a master binnacle, not yet fitted with its

compass. To the rear of the bridge was a small wooden compartment from which came a buzz of conversation.

Jeff moved towards its open door. Three men sat on the floor in earnest contemplation over a maze of coloured wiring which led, in the ultimate to a squat, square metal box.

That, too was familiar to Jeff. It was the Asdic set, the anti-submarine detector which he had seen and heard working on the destroyer.

His shadow made the men look up.

"Morning," one said with a smile. "Having a look around? She's in a bit of a mess at the moment. You going to be on her?"

"I'm the captain," Jeff replied, rather primly.

A second man climbed to his feet, reached behind him and put on a petty officer's peaked cap.

"We're having a bit of trouble with this set, sir," he said. "I've been working on it for a couple of days. I think it's a newish type and we haven't yet got the CAFO on it. We'll get it straightened out, I've no doubt."

"No doubt," Jeff echoed. "Well, carry on Petty Officer."

"Aye, aye, sir."

Jeff moved away to the back of the bridge, leaned his elbows on the yet empty pigeon-holed signal flag locker. For a few minutes he absorbed all he could see. She seemed so small, no longer than the foredeck of his last ship. And the freeboard was so low. Why, the maindeck of his liner was higher than this bridge. Still, these things went to sea, out into the North Sea and down the Biscay. Jeff was somewhat vague on fishing grounds.

Accommodation? His mind swung to that. Where did the crew sleep? Where was the accommodation for the officers. He went exploring.

On the foredeck, immediately in front of the bridge he saw a box-like companion-way. A man was testing the swing of a thick door, he tried it through an arc of its swing several times. As the door nearly closed Jeff saw on a small metal plate above it the legend 'Ward-room'.

"Pardon me," he said as he stepped past the man.

"Watch the paint. It's still wet down there."

One half of the box-like companion-way was a small bathroom, with the smallest bath Jeff had ever seen. A man could just sit in. But it was a bath.

"And that's something," he mused.

The acrid, pungent smell of new paint slightly stung his nostrils as he reached the bottom of the companion-way. Soundlessly his lips shaped for a whistle. Although the lighting was from one bare globe, as the ship was still attached to shore lighting, he was visibly impressed.

The ward-room was roughly 'L' shaped and went for two-thirds of the beam of the ship, about eighteen feet. In width it was roughly twelve feet. The short foot of the 'L' was a deep recess which had settees on three sides with a table filling the space between. Although it was not yet fitted he could see that with the dining part of the ward-room curtained off the remainder would be extremely comfortable.

'Especially when she's going full blast,' he thought, looking at a black-japanned slow-combustion stove.

The remaining part of the beam, about nine feet, was utilized to construct a two-berth cabin.

'So, that's it. A whole lot better than I expected.'

He climbed once more to the deck and stood in indecision trying to decide whether to take a look at the ratings quarters or not.

"Are you the Skipper?"

A harsh, flat voice came from the region of his shoulder.

Jeff spun round. In front of him stood a stocky, middle-aged man. He was dressed in grease-stained, washed-out overalls, a dingy blue serge jacket and on his head he had a curious sort of black, tightly fitting linen skull cap the panels of which were joined at the top under a button.

"I'm the commanding officer," Jeff replied somewhat austere.

"Oh, aye." The man rubbed forcibly at his hands with a portion of cotton waste. "I'm the chief. I've been standing by her for a couple of weeks. Name of Porter."

Jeff was used to engineers who wore white boiler suits when performing their mysterious functions below, and who on deck were dressed either in white or navy blue patrol jackets with the proud insignia of their rank on the shoulders.

'Good heavens!' he thought. 'Surely this man was. . .'

"What is your rank?"

"Chief engineman. I've told you." Jeff stiffened visibly, but the man went on quite unperturbed. "Patrol Service Stoker Petty Officer. I'm due for my Chief Petty Officer R.N.R. any time now. It will put a few extra bob in the kitty."

Jeff realized that he was dealing with a type, an independent character who actually had not a trace of the veiled insolence he had at first suspected.

"What sort of ships were you in before this?"

"Same as this. I sailed out of Shields mostly, but I've had a few years in Hull trawlers." He kept the piece of waste moving rhythmically between his hands. "I was called up first couple of days. Soon found myself chief on a little wooden drifter at South-end. Examination Service! Me. . . Me what's taken to sea the biggest and the best." He searched around expertly for a target, found it and spit expertly. "I put in a request . . . and here I am."

Jeff smiled. Somewhat obliquely he felt he had a kindred spirit. This was a man who felt that his first appointment belittled his dignity, his ability and his pride. Bleakly he wondered what the reaction would be if he put in a request for a move to a larger ship.

"This is more satisfactory, I take it?" He cross examined.

The target was sighted and was again expertly hit.

"I wouldn't sail on this cow for a dollar a minute in peacetime. Not if they were cased in gold, I wouldn't."

Jeff was slightly surprised at the vehemence.

"Why . . . ? What's wrong? Are the engines not . . . ?"

"Engine room is the best in the world. Christian never skimped a ship. She's superheater boilered, easy on the fires and she'll do eleven an' a bit with something in hand." Professional pride rang true.

"Well, what's wrong with her?"

"As a ship? Nothing. You've got about the biggest and fastest trawler in the world, mister. Best fitted out, too, I'd say. You ought to see our place aft. Like a liner. Frig an' all." He inspected a grimy paw which no cotton waste would whiten. "But she's . . . she's. . . ." He shrugged.

Before Jeff could pin him down to a definite point the man went off at a tangent.

"Number One's around somewhere hounding the yard manager," he chuckled. "He's a lofty bloke and he's got a little black book. Every time the yard manager sees him and his book he runs and hides."

Jeff's eyebrows slimed slightly. "A book?"

"Aye." The man of engines held his two palms close together as if they were an open book. "On this page," he touched one palm. "Things to be done. On that page," another palm was caressed. "Things not done, but what Number One wants doing. We've got a little hut on the quay. Until we settle in that's where all the work is."

"Well, I'd better find it. Possibly Number One will be there. I will see you later, Chief."

"I've no doubt, sir." The term of respect slightly jolted Jeff coming as it did after such an obviously free and easy manner.

"Whereabouts is the hut?"

"See yon red brick building? It's around the corner from that. 'Job Eleven' is on the door."

Jeff moved away. As he did he heard the chief call out. "And tell Number One they haven't shifted that alarm bell in the engine room. It's smack in the way of. . . ." The screech of a band saw drowned the rest of the sentence.

"Deliver your own damned messages. . . . What do you think . . . ?" It got no further than a thought. The engineman was already moving away and Jeff shrugged. Then he smiled. The humour of it struck him mildly. "That will be one for the book, I suppose," he murmured.

He found the small wooden hut, scarcely bigger than a garden shed. On the door was a card with the typewritten

legend 'Job 11' and in brackets the addition, in ink, 'H.M.S. *Charon*'.

Jeff thrust against the door and walked in. Sitting at a hinged shelf which did duty for a table was a young officer still wearing his gas mask haversack slung around his shoulder and his shining new badge cap tilted to the back of his head.

"Hullo." Jeff stopped. "Are you the formidable Number One I've been hearing about?"

"No indeed." The youngster climbed to his feet. On his sleeve was the single ring of a sub-lieutenant R.N.V.R. "I thought you were when you breezed in."

Jeff chilled slightly. "I'm the captain. You will be. . . ." He stopped on a rising note of interrogation.

Hastily the youngster adjusted his cap, ran his thumb down the canvas strap of his gas-mask haversack and clicked to attention.

"Sub Lieutenant Perrott, sir. I arrived an hour ago. The base directed me here."

The little formality thawed Jeff.

"Good. You'll be able to get stuck into some work. Fixed up where you are to stay? We're not in commission yet. Not for a week or so."

The sub-lieutenant gaped momentarily. "Stay . . . I . . . I thought we would be on board. Perhaps the base. . ."

Jeff chuckled. "They will have fixed you up, no doubt. I'm at an hotel which is choked to the eaves with naval officers from admirals down."

"What sort of ship are we . . . is *Charon*, sir?"

"Haven't you seen her?"

"No. I arrived in this office only a minute or two before you. They said I would find Number One here. . . ." He paused slightly. "With a little black book." A tone of diffidence crept in on the last sentence.

Jeff chuckled. "I've heard about the book, too. Wonder where he can be?" He looked out of the dingy window.

"You say you haven't seen her yet? Well, no time like the present. Come along. I'll show you what she's like and possibly we'll meet Number One on our travels." He looked at the

youngster then added, "You can leave that lot behind you," tapping the gas-mask haversack with its attendant tin hat. "I don't suppose there'll be a gas attack while we're looking her over."

"Did you have a decent journey up?" Jeff asked, making conversation as he closed the ill-fitting door with a jerk.

"Quite good. I came up from Plymouth. Stopped off at London for a day . . . I . . ."

"Plymouth? What were you doing there?"

"Actually I had been at Portland doing a refresher course on Asdic. I'm your Asdic officer."

"And a few other things besides. But, a refresher course . . . ?"

"I did one—just over a week's course, about a year ago." He looked at Jeff swiftly. "I'm permanent R.N.V.R. *President*, you know. The ship on the Thames at Blackfriars."

Jeff didn't know, but let it pass.

"I joined in October '38."

He said it as if he was a veteran of some campaign. As if '38 should go down in history with '14, '49 and other dates which have earned identification without the addition of the century.

"On what did you do your refresher course?"

"A trawler at Portland. We didn't learn a whole lot more. There were twenty-five of us in a class," he added ingeniously. "It was interesting. But there wasn't room to swing a cat."

Jeff carefully avoided some red rusted girders, picked his way towards the quay. He slid a sidelong glance at the other.

"And you've no idea what *Charon* is?"

"No, sir. What is she?"

They had stepped clear of the buildings and were a few yards away from her.

"There she is."

For a few long seconds Perrott gazed at the ship which was to be home for an indefinite period.

"Oh, lor'. An Asdic trawler."

Jeff felt a slight resentment at the tone. He crisped his voice trimmed it with a chill.

"You'd better get on board and have a look around. If you see Number One tell him I'll be in the office."

"Yes, sir." Perrott saluted smartly, vaguely conscious that for some reason the warmth had fled from Jeff's voice and face.

"Ask him to make an entry in his black book. 'To get one cat'."

"A cat, sir?"

"Yes. For you to practice swinging. You'll have room."

He turned on his heel and walked back towards the hut.

As he retraced his steps he felt a mild sense of irritation at Perrott's reaction to his first sight of *Charon*.

What the devil did he want? People just didn't go around picking and choosing ships. They were given the tools at hand and were left to get on with the job. Why! Little drifters not a quarter of the size of *Charon*, barely 100 tons had done grand work in the last war at Dover and off the south Irish coast. He'd have to pep his ideas up a bit. Conveniently, for the moment, Jeff thrust to the background his own first feeling of resentment. He turned before reaching the corner and looked back at her.

Glory be! She had a wonderful flare on her bow. He dimly appreciated what the designer had aimed at when he first put her lines to paper. That raking bow and flare would deal with rearing seas and still come out on top. And from the bow the sheer ran backwards—he quickly skipped the startlingly low freeboard midships—to a nice rise astern.

Jeff screwed up one eye, gave her another look and went into the hut.

Pride was born. A small and puny infant as yet, but it was born.

"I'm glad you. . . ."

"How do you do. I'm. . . ."

They spoke simultaneously, stopped after the first few words, then both spoke again.

"Sorry."

Then they both grinned.

Jeff extended his hand.

"I'm the commanding officer," he said.

"I'm the first lieutenant. Allen."

Jeff liked him at the first glance. His eyes slipped quickly from the one R.N.V.R. wavy ring on the sleeves to the squarish face, the quizzical blue eyes which seemed rather darker shaded as they were by bushy eyebrows over deep-set sockets.

"I thought you were the yard manager," Allen went on. "There were one or two things I wanted to mention to him."

Jeff chuckled.

"I've already heard of the Scourge of the Yard with the little black book."

Allen scowled momentarily. "We have to take her to sea. If they are not done now heaven knows when they will be done. I keep a note of his promises and ginger him up after a few days. Have you seen her yet?"

"I have."

"She's coming into shape. She's the biggest and fastest trawler in the world." His eyes opened with almost schoolboy enthusiasm. "It's true. I've looked her up in Lloyd's. She's 570 tons, 170 feet long, draws 18 feet and can do twelve knots."

A faint smile flickered over Jeff's face. He thought of the 10,000 tons he had recently left, and of the eighteen knots. He pulled a chair towards him with his foot and sat down.

"Eleven and a half, with a bit in hand I'm told," he murmured.

Allen looked at him for a second or two.

"You've met the chief. That skeleton at the feast. We've crossed swords, too. What a man to moan."

"He's a type. Tell me, Number One. What sea experience have you?"

Allen fingered his bottom lip before replying.

"Limited, I'm afraid, sir. A few short training periods with the fleet, a few trips on coasters and a fair amount of yachting as crew. I've been in the R.N.V.R. for nearly two years. I was Severn Division. My home is near Bridgwater, in Somerset, but I used to motor cycle to Bristol for training, midweek and week-ends."

"And this is your first ship?"

"The war hasn't been on long," Allen chuckled then looked anxiously to see if his mildly humorous reply had earned a frown. "It is," he added.

"Hm." Jeff, not a great deal older than the other, felt almost patriarchal.

"Since my appointment I've been swotting up Number One's job like blazes in the manual," Allen went on with just a tinge of anxiety in his voice. "I think I've got most of it taped."

"I've no doubt about that," Jeff replied reassuringly.

Allen shook his head. "Can't think why I got the job. I didn't expect a Number One's job on such a big ship at the first crack. Why! A friend of mine, with more seniority is navigating officer on a paddle mine-sweeper. I thought I might click for something like that. Thank the lord it wasn't dogsbody on a cruiser."

Jeff smiled. But recently he was regretting that his appointment was not as watch-keeping officer on a cruiser and here was his first lieutenant thanking the Deity for deliverance from just such a fate.

"Married?" he asked.

"Not likely."

Jeff opened his cigarette case and offered Allen one.

"When does the ship's company arrive?"

"In a week, I'm told. We have the chief engineman and cox'n here. I like the feel of the cox'n. He's been in Trinity House ships as bos'n," Allen chuckled. "He and I have been making a few suggestions to the yard manager. If I miss him going one way, Cox'n catches him going another."

"Holy Pete. Has he got a little black book, too?"

"Hm, hm."

Jeff's first impression of the cox'n was similar to Allen's. He found him directing a shore working party of ratings disposing of some sea stores. For a while he stood near in silence as the men manhandled the heavy coils of wire, steel reels, and thick coils of manilla rope.

"You are the cox'n?" he asked after a while.

The man turned, came to attention briskly and saluted neatly.

"Yessir. Potter's the name."

"I am the captain. You've been in Trinity House ships, I'm told."

"Yessir." The cox'n ran the two words together until they really became 'yezur'. There was a distinct burr about his accents which spoke of West Country.

"You were on the Reserve?"

"I was, sir. Lot of us in Trinity House were. I joined the R.N.R. when I was in deep sea ships. I was with Union Castle, quartermaster, then bos'n up to a few years ago."

Jeff's eyebrows climbed slightly.

"So was I Union Castle—up to a few weeks ago."

The cox'n ran off a short list of ships in which he had served.

"We never met but we must know a lot of people."

"Yessir."

"What part of the country do you come from, Cox'n?"

"Somerset, sir. North Somerset. From Dunster, little place near Minehead." Cox'n's tones took on a deeper, richer burr.

"Same county as Number One."

"Oh, aye, sir. I know his home village well." The man's blue eyes took on a reflective distant look. He seemed to be staring over Jeff's shoulder into the distance, a distance measured in time instead of miles. "Did a lot of my courting around there."

"You're married then, Cox'n?"

Yes, sir. But she's been dead this fifteen year and gone. I was coming up from the Cape when she died." He paused a moment. "Child-birth."

Jeff felt slightly embarrassed as if he had probed too deeply into a man's private life. Swiftly he went off on another tack.

"Most of the stores on board, Cox'n?"

"Most, sir. I have to meet Number One in an hour." His eyes flicked upwards to the clock in the yard tower. "We are chasing the yard manager for some stuff-timber."

"Then God have mercy on his soul. With you and Number One after him, he'll need it." He looked at the short, sturdy man before him and felt a warmth creeping through him. He felt he

Jeff turned and found the fitting-out commander standing behind with a smile on his face. Behind him again was a yeoman of signals with a rolled-up White Ensign tucked under his arm.

The commander turned to the yeoman.

"Bend on."

The yeoman climbed to the engine-room casing behind the bridge, swiftly bent on the ensign to a short gaff which hung to the rear of the funnel.

"All ready, sir." The yeoman stepped slightly sideways so that the ensign, when hoisted would be clear to those on the foredeck.

The commander looked at Jeff with eyebrows slightly raised. "All yours, Captain."

"Call ship's company to attention, First Lieutenant."

"Ship's company, 'SHUN."

Jeff turned to the yeoman waiting expectantly.

"Hoist."

The White Ensign fluttered slowly upwards followed by the commissioning pendant, Jeff's hand went to the salute and from close to his elbow came a sweet, high-pitched trilling sound, thin and plaintive.

Charon's first bos'n's mate had achieved his first pipe for her first ensign on her first day as one of His Majesty's ships of war.

As the yeoman made fast and Jeff's hand came down from the salute Allen murmured softly:

"He's been practising that half the morning down the magazine. Not bad, was he?"

Jeff nodded and smiled. "Not bad at all." After a moment he added. "Dismiss the men, Number One. I'll see the petty officers in my room by and by. In the meantime, let's wet her head, shall we?"

He led the way, followed by the fitting-out commander and they celebrated mildly with a couple of drinks in the ward-room.

Perrott, standing rather shyly with a gin in his hand said, "Some of the men were in a pub and heard that the trawler which was commissioned a few days ago didn't pipe the ensign.

So. . . " he paused and looked around the small ward-room for a moment. . . "So, we drew a bos'n's call, and after a couple of trial blows Mullins was elected."

"And nicely he did it, too," the commander said heartily. "Rounded it off quite nicely. Well, if you insist. Just one more. I've another ship to see off and a ton of work waiting for me. Good luck, you chaps."

A week of intense activity followed. They steamed over a measured mile and proved the eleven and a bit left something in hand. They had a crazy day of flag and lamp signalling tests with another trawler and the shore base in a triangular competition, with the experts ashore winning easily.

There was one exciting day when, after dropping down river to the ammunition lighter and loading ammunition and depth charges until early afternoon, they moved out into the estuary and tried a full-calibre shoot.

A shore-based petty officer fussed around the gun's crew on the gun platform like a clucking hen. Jeff, on the bridge, could not detect all he was saying but soon found that the man completed every sentence with a barked 'right'.

"This is a mark four, four-inch quick firer. Right?"

"Slow time, now. Number One is layer and captain of the gun. Right!" And so on with almost the whole of the period generously besprinkled with clipped 'rights'.

The first shoot was a conspicuous, resounding failure. Although done in slow time everything went wrong. The yellow target, a wooden raft with canvas and slats superstructure went completely unscathed. The first shot stunned everybody including the wide-eyed gun's crew and went winging its way into space without anybody seeing the fall of shot.

"There's nothing between us and America, thank heaven," Jeff said drily, his ears ringing.

The next was a long way off line due to a completely wrong application of deflection, the third and fourth—the last—were well over and extremely short respectively.

"Well, you scared the fish," the petty officer said indulgently. "And it doesn't bite you, does it? The noise is nothing. Right?"

It's the receiving end which does the worrying. Right?"

The depth-charge throwers were tested with sand-filled oil drums, the machine guns aft and on each wing of the bridge were allowed to contribute their nerve-ripping bursts—bar a few stoppages for jams—with rather more success at their target than the four-inch gun.

"And a good time has been had by all," Allen said. "Did it make you jump?" he asked Perrott who had been on the gun platform.

"Right out of my skin," the youngster replied with engaging honesty. "I never dreamed it would be such a colossal crash."

As the days progressed Jeff sensed a smoothness developing in the ship's routine. It was nothing obvious, but nevertheless it was there. He had felt the same reaction a few days after sailing on a passenger liner. People had begun to find their way around, had begun to do things without being endlessly instructed or spurred on.

He found, too, that he had developed a liking for his officers. They were quite dissimilar in their attitude towards ship's routine. Allen was almost like a work's manager. At most times during the day he could be found somewhere around the ship with a small band of acolytes, headed by the cox'n, engaged in some task of amending the shipyard work, adding something or removing what he considered useless or redundant.

After one long day of intense activity and much sawing and hammering on the bridge, Jeff went up in the afternoon to find two seaman putting finishing touches to a complicated rearrangement of the windbreak on each wing of the bridge.

Jeff studied it pensively.

"I found the wind could make a backdraught at sea," a calm voice said behind him. "So I've altered it. 'Come thou winter winds, blow'. It won't get at us," a calm voice behind him explained.

It was Allen.

"I see. Very well, Number One, you carry on. But leave me some bridge, won't you?" Jeff said drily.

Allen grinned.

"I think Number One's passion for alteration and addition can sometimes be carried to excess," Perrott said rather plaintively one afternoon.

"What now? Is he proposing to shift the funnel, or the mast?"

"Not quite. But he has drawn plans, on the back of one of my charts, to take over the steward's pantry, turn it into a single berth room for me so that he can have our room to himself."

"And the pantry. What fate for that?"

Perrott hesitated. "He has some plan which includes the bathroom and lavatory. . . ."

Jeff put his foot down hard on the negative side.

"Not that there would have been no advantage in it," Perrott contributed at the subsequent long-drawn-out inquest. "Number One snores shockingly at times."

Charon received orders one evening to sail in the morning for a working-up base in the remote fastnesses of the Scottish outer islands.

Jeff and Allen spent the evening with other officers at a temporary Officers Club—a charitable name for a club which had existed before war started under the name Tail of the Bank. It was run ostensibly by a committee, in actuality was owned by a shrewd Cypriot who conveniently altered the rules so that a uniform was equivalent to a proposal for membership—for men that is—increased his prices and installed a small flood-light to illuminate a Union Jack behind the bar.

His lady members also increased their prices.

Patriotism could ask no more.

Standing in a bus queue in a darkened street Jeff and Allen heard familiar voices. Some of their crew were in the queue. A strange voice was raised above the others.

" . . . Bleedin' *Charon*. If she don't do it tomorrow. She'll do it the next day. But mark my bleedin' words she'll do somebody in. Bleedin' killer ship, she is."

Jeff waited to hear a familiar voice, a voice of one of his own crew raised in defence, in protest.

He heard a subdued mutter. A familiar voice took up the tale.

" . . . Six men she's done for. . . . Every trip some poor bastard copped out. I'm putting in a 'request' as soon as I can."

"That's Cooper. Our H.S.D.," Allen murmured. "He and I will be in the confessional box tomorrow morning as ever is."

Jeff remained silent and tight lipped.

They heard a voice which seemed almost adolescent. Seemed on the point of breaking into a high-pitched falsetto.

"What's wrong with her? She seems all right to me. Officers is all right. Mess deck is better than the flippin' trawler we lay alongside. She's. . . ."

Scorn poured down on him.

"Aw pipe down, Bunts. You don't know yer arse from the forepeak. You've still got fresh water in yer bilges. You want to ask the chief. He'll tell you. . . ."

The bus squealed to a stop and the queue flowed into it. The ratings piled upstairs in a noisy stream. Jeff and Allen took seats inside.

As they settled down Allen said, "I've heard a lot of this nonsense in the past couple of weeks. I think the chief had better join us in the confessional box also."

Jeff remained quiet and absorbed during the journey answering Allen's conversational gambits only in monosyllables. They were on board and in the ward-room before he mentioned the subject of his reflections.

"What have you heard—I mean about the ship, Number One?"

Allen was performing a short and pleasing ceremony with a bottle and two glasses at the small sideboard.

"Oh. Odd bits and pieces about her. I gather from our ex-trawlermen that she killed a man when she was being launched and . . ." he studied the levels in the glasses. "All right for you?" he went off at a tangent and handed a glass over at Jeff's brief nod. ". . . and apparently she has formed a habit of doing it. That's their story, of course," he hastened to add. "The chief seems to be the principal purveyor of tales of disaster and mayhem."

Allen surveyed his glass, tossed off the contents and murmured, "WNA."

"Sorry?"

"Down to my marks, winter, North Atlantic," Allen said with a grin. It was one of his pet humorous remarks based on the Plimsoll line marked in on the side of every merchant ship.

"I wonder how much foundation there is? It seems. . . ."

Allen cut in. "About as much as there is for any of their old wives' tales. Judging by the ham hands they have its a source of continual wonder to me that we haven't had a dozen accidents already."

Jeff leaned back pensively. "I'm not so certain. Ships are queer creatures, funny things."

"So are men. The chief and Cooper and I are due to have a funny session in the morning sometime. They'll have to work hard to make me laugh." He locked away the bottle and put the used glasses through the small hatch for the steward to cope with in the morning. "I'll say good night, sir."

"Good night, Number One. See I get a call at seven."

"Aye, aye, sir."

The bustle of sailing, their first trip beyond the confines of the base, kept everybody busy. Signals passed, *Charon* received permission to slip; she steamed down the harbour, the pennants showing her number fluttering bravely from the yard-arm. The boom defence vessel challenged and was answered. And *Charon* curtsied to her old friend and enemy, the open sea.

"Red watch to cruising stations, sir," a leading seaman informed Perrott who had the bridge and was standing behind Jeff.

"Very well, Leading Seaman."

After an interval when the traffic of the harbour had been left behind Jeff turned to his sub-lieutenant.

"You have the first watch?"

"Yes, sir."

"She's all yours, Sub," Jeff stepped to the back of the bridge. He leaned against the edge of the signal locker giving auto-

matically to *Charon's* slight roll and pitch. His mind slipped slowly back to the conversation of the previous night. Ship's were odd creatures . . . sometimes . . . but so were men. Accidents happened on all ships, mainly because men were careless . . . because men would take a chance . . . is Sub going to alter for that coaster? . . . good man, gave him plenty of time and made it clear . . . useful man at the wheel . . . she's running a wake like a ruled edge. . . . Wonder what Number One had to say in his 'confessional box' . . . otherwise a store-cum-workshop he had rigged under the fo'c'sle head . . . you should alter at the next buoy, Sub . . . what a fuss you take over a simple bearing . . . watch the tide . . . it will swing you on to the buoy . . . clever little man . . . you altered course with cables to spare . . . don't look back at me for approval with a fat grin on your face . . . it's your job . . . remember the occasion when I had to take a watch on my own . . . night-time too. Chief officer had slipped and hurt himself. . . . Now, that was an accident . . . couldn't blame the ship.

"I'm going below for a while, Sub. Call me if you are at all in doubt."

"Aye, aye, sir." Perrott tried hard to hide the elation in his voice. Not yet twenty-one years old and left in charge of a ship's bridge at sea.

"Watch your steering, now," he said sternly down the voice tube.

"Huh? . . . Yessir." The experienced trawlerman-cum-naval-A.B., R.N.R. at the wheel amended his answer. His following comment was inwards.

'Watch me wheel! I could thread this bitch through the eye of needle, day or night, drunk or sober.'

Charon slid expertly alongside the mooring buoy at the working-up base, secured and for the next ten days went through a period of hilarious, hectic evolutions under the direction of the instructors until, as Allen said, "We could do it in our sleep. Hereafter, if I hear a bicycle bell I'll jump to 'action stations'."

"That is the general idea," Perrott contributed gravely. "I must say my crowd aft are on the top line."

Allen looked at him keenly to see if the sub-lieutenant was taking a rise out of him following a slight contretemps with the fo'c'sle party and the mooring buoy. But Perrott's face was smoothly bland and innocent.

Came the day of departure, with a few criticisms and a stirring word or two of praise from the senior officer in command of the base.

"'To Belfast for local escort and patrol duties'," Jeff quoted from the signal. "It could be worse. Steam for 14.00 hours, Number One."

"Aye, aye, sir."

Jeff's report to base read: "At 22.00 hours 11.12.39 I was informed by the Officer of the Watch that there had been an accident in the engine room. Stoker Blore, on duty as greaser had slipped and fallen into the crankpit as the ship was proceeding at 11 knots. Stoker Petty Officer Porter, Chief Engineman, stopped engines on his own initiative, reported to the bridge and had lifted Stoker Blore from the crankpit by the time the First Lieutenant arrived in the engine room. Blore appeared to be severely injured. He was brought up from the engine room in a stretcher. I examined him, but could find no sign of life.

Ship resumed course and speed as before at 22.15 hours.

Petty Officer Porter's report attached."

It was an accident. A careless and green stoker, not taking care to have a good hand grip. His oily hand slipped and that was that. Jeff peered out over the dark and smooth sea. It was just one of those things that happen. A lot more people would die before the war was over. Perhaps all of us. He shivered.

"That's the first." Porter stuffed a grimy thumb in his pipe, surveyed his audience. "There'll be others. Like a vampire, she is. Blood, more blood. Never satisfied."

* * * * *

The first lieutenant of Asdic Patrol trawler *Oxwich*, Sub-Lieutenant 'Gus' Pratt, stretched his legs out luxuriantly from the deep easy chair in the small, comfortable ward-room.

"All things considered things could be worse, sir." He glanced at his commanding officer. "Gib. is a REAL naval base and there are not too many of us. We could have clicked for Scapa."

"True, Oh Sage." The commanding officer busied himself with a pipe scraper. "And I must say the crew has shaken down wonderfully well."

"This new cox'n we have, Cater. I like the feel of him. He must be good to be whipped up to petty officer so soon. He stands no messing and knows how to handle men."

"Again thou speakest but the truth, Oh Sage. And in your honour I'll pay for the next round if you pour them out."

Ted Cater had started the long road back.

CHAPTER IX

NUMBER ONE carefully sheltered his cigarette case from the spray, selected one, lit it on the first explosion of the match and shot the dead stick away to leeward.

The cigarette drawing to his satisfaction he turned to Jeff who was sitting on his tall chair behind the binnacle.

"I'm told that the slight glow of yellow in the sky is something called sunlight. Ever heard of it, sir?"

Jeff stirred and smiled.

"I've actually seen it."

Number One was suitably awed.

Jeff continued the theme. "People take a holiday and lie on the beaches in it. Brings a glow of health."

Number One surveyed his half-sodden cigarette, wondered if the light would dry out the wet enough for him to at least half finish it before it disintegrated into a finger full of shredded tobacco and sodden paper.

"People take a holiday and spend it 'amidst snow and ice'." He unconsciously quoted a few words from a much abused song. "But why in hell they do it voluntarily I can't think." Allen watched his commanding officer closely for a moment or two from the folds of the hood of his duffle coat. "Speaking of holidays," he said picking his words carefully. "Aren't we somewhere near a boiler-clean leave?"

He waited for his seeds to germinate.

"The chief tells me his boilers are salting up badly and he has a few serious defects below." After a brief pause he added to the sky at large. "I have one or two I want seeing to when My Lords can get around to giving me the chance."

Jeff moved from his perch and rolled to the front of the bridge. He chuckled.

"I've seen you mugging away into that tattered and dog-eared black book. The Admiralty should seize it and impound it as a volume impeding the War Effort."

Allen snorted. "If they did and studied it they would learn a few things that are essential on a ship like this doing a job like this."

Jeff nodded slowly. "No doubt, Number One, no doubt."

He lifted his binoculars slung around his neck and for the twentieth time in an hour he swept them steadily around the horizon. He expected to see nothing, and nothing he saw except a rolling sea, towering, sullen, subsiding after the most recent gale, but glowering a threat as it husbanded its strength for another furious effort of raging, white-crested mountains.

"... On a ship like this doing a job like this."

Allen's words rang faintly through his mind like a constant echo... 'job like this... job like this...'

A job like this. Ten days patrol from a point due north of Lerwick, in the Shetlands. Steam at eight knots in a northerly direction for 400 miles, due east for fifty miles, south for 400 miles, west for fifty miles. And start again. Two rendezvous, weather permitting. One half-way up with another trawler which had a more westerly beat and the other at the top with an armed

liner which had hammered her way south from the Denmark Straits.

The four days at Lerwick. "That throbbing metropolis of the sub arctic," as Number One had described it once in one of his more caustic moods.

Jeff knew that *Charon's* job was but one fragment of a complicated pattern covering that wide and dreary expanse. He knew that over the horizon were other ships, suffering just as great a degree of prolonged boredom and discomfort, some even greater. And he knew that it was necessary, as necessary as a listening post away out in front of muddy trenches, and when in the depths of gloom he also realized that just as easily they could be as expendable as that post so long as they fulfilled the task of giving an alarm if they encountered a strong German force.

Perrott had asked ingenuously one morning, "What do we do if we sight the *Bismark* or the *Von Spee*?"

"Scream like hell and hope she'll go away," Allen said tersely.

"Report her—in plain language—and hope some large ships will be in the vicinity," was Jeff's answer.

"You've got the drill, Sub?" Allen went on. "You heave up alongside and say, 'Pardon me, are you a member of this club. *Sieg Heil*' then pipe 'boarding party away' and it's every man for himself. I bags the picture of Hitler over the ward-room sideboard."

Gradually Jeff became aware that Allen was still talking on the same theme.

"... We commissioned in November. We've had one boiler clean in January and now it's April." Allen pursued his topic. "Can't we impress it on Belfast that we are only two-thirds effective with the boilers salted up and the other parts in the engine room crying out for attention?"

Jeff smiled wryly.

"Impressing Belfast by remote control is a slow business. I would imagine that every other ship in the base is trying to 'impress' its claim."

"I can't imagine why they keep our books at Belfast. We've only seen the damn' place once, for a few days after commissioning. We went back to the Clyde for our last boiler clean and came straight back up here."

Jeff felt a rising tide of irritation.

"Look, Number One. I feel about these things as you do, but constant reiteration achieves nothing—except getting my goat. Give it a rest for a while will you?"

"Sorry, sir." Allen stared straight ahead his face impassive. He knew that in a few minutes Jeff, repentant, would offer a new conversational gambit. Although he felt tired himself he knew that the strain on Jeff had been considerably more.

At the outset of the long patrols, months back Jeff had arranged the watches so that they did four hours on watch and had eight off. But, in any emergency, in any period of doubt or during the height of a gale Jeff had stayed on the bridge hour after hour until exhaustion had driven him down for a few hours sleep. He had watched these moments of rising irritation coming with greater frequency. One of them had almost broken out into a flaming row.

Jeff had spent most of the night on the bridge in a half gale, with flurries of wicked, eye-lashing snow after a report had been received from Admiralty that a raft holding some men had been sighted by a patrolling aircraft. The position was within a few miles of their vicinity. They had searched until tired eyes saw the raft a dozen times in the white-flecked grey-black sea. And at daylight they were told it was a false alarm.

Jeff had left the bridge for a short while saying he would have a wash and a coffee and would take over his forenoon watch.

"Did you take a cup of coffee to the captain?" Allen had asked a grimy seaman.

"Yes, sir." He paused, then went on. "I don't think he'll drink it, sir. He's dead asleep in his chair. Proper 'Arry Flakers. Right out."

Allen ran the tip of his tongue around his top lip for a moment.

"Right. Tell the steward not to disturb the captain until

midday and I'll have some tea and toast up here, on the bridge."

"Yes, sir."

Allen had carried on until nearly midday although his eyes felt as if the lids weighed a pound each.

"What time is it. Number One?"

The tones were harsh and flat. Jeff was at the top of the bridge ladder. His eyes were red and his face was screwed up until two question marks ran from the side of his nose to each corner of his mouth.

"Around half past eleven, sir. I decided. . . ."

"Why did you do my watch?" The tones were still flat and harsh. Jeff moved to the front of the bridge.

"It seemed a shame to wake you after you'd had a long night, so. . . ."

"In future let me make that decision. When I am incapable of doing a watch I will let you know."

"Very well, sir."

"I'll carry on now."

Allen had gone into the Asdic hut, studied the chart for a few moments and returned to the front of the bridge.

"We come to the end of this leg in fifteen minutes. Course is now North 75 West. We alter at 11.45 to North 5 East. Speed is eight knots."

Allen had kept it cool and impersonal although he felt a considerable degree of resentment at the furious reception of his gesture.

"Very well, Number One."

"Anything else, sir?"

Jeff put his shoulder against a stanchion, lifted his glasses for a survey of the sea. Without taking them down he said:

"No." As Allen turned away Jeff added, "Thanks Number One."

That was all. It was enough. It was the end of one of frequent moments of irritation which blazed up, glowed momentarily and died as quickly. But Allen understood and made full allowance.

So when Jeff said, "Give it a rest," he diplomatically subsided.

After a while Jeff said, "How is Packe this morning?"

"I haven't seen him, but I'm told he is moaning and groaning crescendo, with feeling," Allen replied. "He should have shoved his head there instead of his hand, then it wouldn't have hurt him the slightest bit," he went on viciously.

"I'm certain there is nothing broken, merely swelling, but as you say he groans horribly as soon as he is touched." Jeff thrust his hands down into the pockets of his duffle and hunched his shoulders.

"The damnable part is that the chief hovers around playing Greek chorus with his tales of disaster and death. He has frightened the life out of Packe—and half the crew. I'd like to see the back of him."

"He's a first-class engineer."

"And a real menace to the peace of the ship. He's always threatening to put in a 'Request for a draft', but never does."

"Well. Take a look at Packe when you go off watch."

"Aye, aye, sir."

Jeff rolled over to the small chart room at the rear of the Asdic hut leaving the bridge to Allen.

"Look at him?" Number One muttered. "I'd like to beat the stupid over the head with a marlinspike."

Packe had earned Allen's extreme displeasure and an injured arm in a startlingly simple manner.

Charon had dropped a cautious half pattern of depth charges on a suspected contact with no result. The remaining charges in the rails had failed to drop down to the release mechanism. Packe, a husky but inexperienced seaman who was part of the depth-charge crew, had thrust with his hand against the erring charge and had released it. But it rolled down, with the weight of several more behind it and had jammed his arm.

Releasing him had taken ten minutes while frightened seamen, lashed by Allen's acid-laden tongue, had taken the weight of the charges off the trapped arm.

The mishap in itself was simple, a mere incident, but it provided fuel for the barely glowing fire of legend of death and disaster which the ex-fishermen of the crew still kept alight. It had blazed furiously, at white heat when the stoker was killed

within days of commissioning, then had waned when nothing more happened. The brief Court of Inquiry had made it clear that the stoker's death was contributed to by his own carelessness and inexperience. *Charon*, Jeff and the chief engine-man were completely exonerated of all blame.

But the crew, deeply steeped in the story, waited for the next which they felt was inevitable.

As the dreary months followed one another in the monotony of patrol with nothing more exciting than the periodic rendezvous the topic lost its flavour.

To some extent this was due to the cox'n's mildly humorous ridicule and Allen's acid sarcasm when any or one of their inexperienced seamen shaped as if he was about to do something stupid.

A classic example, which afforded Allen scope for his tongue, occurred when a stoker tried to get a bucket of water from the sea. He fastened a heaving-line around the handle of the bucket and dropped it over the side into the deceptively smooth sea. Immediately the speed of the ship exerted a tremendous pull on the rope, the stoker strove hard to hold it and failed suffering burns on his palms for his pains and losing the bucket and heaving-line into the bargain.

Allen, who had watched the incident, waxed eloquent before a small but appreciative audience, treated the simple skin burns, then told the cox'n to put the man into first lieutenant's report for losing a bucket and a heaving-line.

"And don't forget to tell the chief that it was you, you poltroon, not the ship."

"What's a poltroon?" the discomfited stoker asked later in the messdeck.

Several hazarded bright but inaccurate guesses none of which were complimentary.

Jeff completed a long scrutiny of the horizon and called to Allen.

"What time is our rendezvous?"

"Any time now, sir. I've been expecting her to heave up for the last hour. The blow might have delayed her a bit. It

should have been *El Kantara*, but she was damaged and another ship has taken over her beat."

There was silence for a few moments then Number One heard Jeff chuckle.

"*Kantara*. I travelled up with an R.N.R. laddie who was joining her. He was quite convinced she was bound for a south Atlantic patrol. I wonder how he likes Denmark Straits?"

Allen thumbed through a sheaf of signals, checked one, searched a list of pennant numbers and looked out of the hut window with a grin.

"Like another laugh, sir? We rendezvous with *Caswell Castle*, one of your old outfit."

Jeff whistled softly, his eyebrows raising as his mouth shaped 'O'. "Good Lord, she's not built for this stuff. She's for the tropics. Life must be hell with the lid off on her in a blow up there."

"Must be," Allen agreed. "If we **MUST** live up here then let's do it in a ship built for the job, like this one."

"Hm, hm."

Charon poised momentarily, contemplated a rolling hill of grey-green sea, estimated it's weight, lowered her head slightly, met the charge, climbed up through it and contemptuously shook herself shouldering away in broken white water the small amount which had clambered on board for a few seconds' precarious hold.

"Yes, indeed," Jeff echoed.

The afternoon watch wore along to a point where darkness, having toyed fitfully with light, became emboldened by the weak opposition and descended in occupational force.

"Ship blacked out, sir," a leading seaman informed Perrott.

"Very well." Perrott peered at his watch. Three-fifteen and already it was as dark as a yard up a chimney and would stay that way until nearly nine o'clock in the morning.

"I want an extra look-out on the bridge," Perrott went on and the leading seaman departed to select a victim.

"Bridge!" the voice was faint and metallic and Perrott crossed to the voice pipe to the wireless office.

"Bridge here."

"Signal coming up, sir. From the Big . . . from Admiralty, sir."

Perrott hauled away on the string and took the folded sheet from the brass cylinder.

By the dim light over the chart table he read it then lifted the cover of the voice pipe to the captain's quarters.

"Captain, sir." He waited until he heard the faint 'plock' as Jeff removed the cover at his end. "Signal coming down, sir. I'm working out the position."

Jeff took the signal from the seaman and studied it. It was addressed to six ships ordering them to converge on an area the longitude and latitude of which were given and instructed them to carry out a search of the area taking detailed instructions from commanding officer of senior ship on the spot.

Perrott turned as Jeff came behind the black-out curtain around the small chart table.

"We're practically on the spot, sir," Perrott said laying his divider points on two marks. "A little north-east if anything. It's roughly our rendezvous area."

Jeff studied the chart.

"Who else is involved?"

Perrott ran his finger swiftly over a patrol disposition report.

"*Leda* is on the patrol west of us, I estimate she's sixty to seventy miles away. *Cape Nash* is about the same to the east—they're on the cross box patrol. Then *Sapphire* and *Opal* are north-east of us, about eighty miles. That leaves *Laurel* coming up astern of us, according to the report she's forty miles astern."

Jeff rubbed his hands around his chin and Allen heard the faint but harsh rasp from the incipient beard. The picture created itself in Jeff's mind. The other ships were the spokes of a wheel converging from the outer rim to the hub—which was *Charon*. Assuming the weather remained as it was they should join at varying periods from six to ten hours. So it presented itself to him.

"Who is senior officer of that lot, Perrott?"

Perrott consulted a Roneod list.

"*Sapphire*. Lieutenant Commander Bowden. Then *Leda*. Lieutenant King. Then you, sir."

"*Sapphire* is eighty miles away you say?" Jeff was ruminating out loud, not really expecting an answer. "Call it nine hours or more, against the wind and four or five hours tide. *Leda*, say seven or eight hours. *Laurel* should be around well before midnight." He turned from the chart table. "We'll drop back ten miles, then circle in a two-mile diameter ring at four knots until the others arrive."

Perrott joined him at the front of the bridge.

"Wonder what we're to look for, sir?"

"Something more than a submarine. Blockade runner perhaps. Must be an important one to call us all in." Suddenly Jeff smacked one fist into another. "*Caswell Castle*. She wasn't in that signal."

"No, sir. Addressed to all trawlers."

"You can bet she's scared up something, a raider probably and is shadowing it. Daren't use wireless . . . that's it . . . and the Admiralty mean it to run through a screen of trawlers. We can report it and if. . ."

"And if we get blown out of the water in the process it's only the loss of a trawler against a solid positional report," Perrott finished on a whisper.

Jeff tightened his lips. "Stop dramatizing things, Sub. Keep your look-outs up to scratch. We might sight *Caswell Castle* anytime."

"Aye, aye, sir."

U-boat 63 cruised along with her whaleback awash. She was poised ready to dive at the first alarm. Below in her minute ward-room her captain raised an amber-filled glass and smiled at his other officers.

"Five days out and success. Two torpedoes hit out of three. Your health, gentlemen, and to our continued success."

The glasses tipped back and were emptied.

"Take the bridge, Otto, let Karl come below for a drink, also. You are certain she was *Union Castle*?"

"Ja, Kapitan. I know them too well. Armed with six-inch guns I would say."

"And our second must have found the magazine. Poof! Wham! And she was gone. Now relieve Karl."

"Ja Kapitan."

Two senior officers frowned over a large-scale chart at the Admiralty.

"She has not come up, yet?"

"Not since her situation report at 08.00 hours. We should have received her 'rendezvous signal' around midday. Weather is moderate. . . ." The speaker consulted a signal pad . . . "visibility four to five miles."

A lieutenant-commander joined them.

In answer to raised eyebrows he shook his head.

"Nothing, sir. We have six trawlers all within fifty to eighty miles of the place where she should be. They have orders to search."

The senior of the two captains frowned. "Only trawlers in that area?"

"Yes, sir. We have . . ." he swiftly named three heavy ships, a battleship and two battle cruisers . . . "ready at immediate notice at Scapa and another two cruisers at Loch Ewe. They were waiting for a convoy."

The senior captain straightened his back after a short scrutiny of the chart.

"It might have been a submarine . . . if she's gone. . . . Had she run across a raider there would have been time for a signal in plain language even if they . . ." he opened his hands and gestured. "But we don't know. And, we MUST know. A raider out and free up there will mean hell and tommy from Cape Town to Iceland." He swung to the lieutenant-commander.

"Tell those trawler fellows to search that area for survivors of *Caswell Castle*. And, if they find any they are to question them. What sunk them? A submarine or a surface ship. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir,"

* * * * *

Jeff accepted the signal and went behind the curtain to read it. "Did you know her well, sir?" Allen asked when he heard the purport of the signal.

"Fairly. I've been on board a few times." He paused. "Cox'n was her bos'n on her maiden voyage."

Number One turned to the extra look-outs. "Keep your eyes well and truly skinned, now. You're looking for rafts, wreckage, anything which will keep a man afloat. Report anything. Understand ANYTHING you see . . . or think you see."

It wanted an hour or so to midnight when a look-out bawled, "Surface ship bearing green 30." *Charon's* signalman clicked a challenge on his lamp.

"Challenge made, sir."

"Target bearing green 30. Range three thousand." Allen, helping out in Jeff's watch, passed the order to the gun crew. The muzzle swung around obediently.

A faint light twinkled, paused and went on in a short flurry.

"It's *Laurel*, sir," the signalman said.

"Check, check, gun fore and aft."

For the next few minutes Jeff and *Laurel* exchanged twinkling signals, arranged areas of search and times for meeting again. Then the dark, shapeless mass merged away into the night.

After a while Jeff asked, "Who was the look-out who spotted her?"

"Milton, sir."

"Good man. Number One, find out why the Asdic operators didn't pick her up."

"Extreme range for them sir, but I'll find out."

Watch followed watch. *Leda* suddenly challenged out of the darkness. Jeff explained what he had done, where *Laurel* would be at certain times and *Leda* took over the control smoothly.

Neither *Sapphire* nor *Opal* showed up until daylight but had been searching meanwhile and *Sapphire* took over the direction relaying signals to Cape Nash through *Laurel* who had met her in the night.

The search was on, efficiently, smoothly each ship probing the

part of a circle from the rim to the hub, overlapping at times but wasting no time nor space.

Occasionally the wind developed a prolonged moan and Jeff frequently consulted the barometer and looked at the sky.

"I don't like," he said. "It's bad enough as it is without having wind and rain. We won't be able to see a couple of hundred yards when it gets dark."

In the last few minutes of Perrott's afternoon watch Jeff sat hunched in his chair. Occasionally he nodded and his head slipped forward on his chest. He had been awake for nearly thirty hours. His head felt curiously tight behind the ears as if somebody was pressing their thumbs there. Odd disconnected fragments of thought chased themselves through his mind, dancing like will-o'-the-wisps eluding the efforts of his tired brain to catch and co-ordinate them. He could hear faint music . . . passengers dancing . . . last dance . . . Cape Town tomorrow . . . he would meet that girl again . . . damned defects . . . Belfast . . . *Caswell Castle* . . . never sailed in her . . . but . . .

"Objec' bearing . . . bearing . . . right ahead, sir." The look-out's voice soared upwards and cracked. "Look's like a raft."

Perrott swung his binoculars up, peered through them once, wiped them impatiently and tried again. He was conscious of Jeff alongside him doing the same.

"Got it, Sub?"

"No, sir, not yet."

The look-out shouted again. "There it is sir, just at the top of that sea. It's. . . ."

"I've got it." Perrott's voice was strangely calm. "It's a raft. I can't see anybody . . . yes I can. . . ." The calm wavered. "One . . . looks like two men lying on it. Can you see it now, sir?"

Jeff's eyes were screwed tightly and he slowly shook his head. All he could see was dancing lights and occasionally darts of flame.

"Hang on to it. Both of you," he rasped. "Signalman. Tell Number One I want him, quickly."

"It's coming up well now, sir. Two men all right. I can't

see any movement." Perrott held his binoculars firmly. "Still dead ahead, sir. About a mile I would say, sir."

"Oh, Number One. We've picked up a raft, right ahead. Two men on it. Clear away sea-boat. . . . Let cox'n take her, have the stewards warm up some blankets and fill the hot-water bottles from the medical chest."

Finally Jeff saw the raft. It was lying low in the water, one corner almost constantly submerged. He could see new white splinters where the wood had been damaged. Probably some of the drums inside were punctured too, he guessed.

Soon the distance was closed to a couple of hundred yards.

"I don't see any movements, sir. If they're . . . alive . . . they must have seen us by now." Perrott kept up his scrutiny.

"Neither would you feel like moving if you'd spent thirty hours or more on that raft. Watch them." Jeff moved to the side of the bridge and looked down at the sea-boat hanging from its davits, its crew, lifebelt clad, sitting on the thwarts.

"I'll circle round, give you a lee and close in to pick you up. Be careful with them, Cox'n," he called. "If either or both are alive wave your arm. Is that clear?"

"Aye, aye, sir."

Charon lost speed, dropped to a crawl. Jeff watched the raft as she crept up to windward of it.

"Slip," he barked. It echoed down to the boat deck.

Soon he saw the boat pulling away, manoeuvre alongside the wallowing raft. The boat's crew seemed to have difficulty in moving the men. He watched the cox'n crawl on to the raft, saw a flash of a knife and one inanimate body slid towards the boat.

For a few minutes the pitching boat obscured his view of the raft, then he saw it pull away leaving the empty raft behind. When the boat was on its course the cox'n stood up and waved his arm widely.

"Good. One is alive." He leaned over the side of the bridge. "Step lively, Number One. Whisk those men down to the ward-room as soon as they are on board. I'll join you as soon as I can."

In silence Jeff watched the sea-boat range alongside the low waist. He saw willing hands lift the poor bedraggled creatures over the rail and saw them disappear down the ward-room hatch with Allen in close attendance.

The boat slid back, was clipped on to its hoisting tackle and was quickly up to boat deck level.

"Give me a course for Lerwick, Sub. Put her on 'full ahead'. I want to write a signal."

He was engrossed over a signal-pad when he heard the cox'n's voice.

"They're off *Caswell Castle*, sir. It was painted on the water-can on the raft. One is in pretty bad shape. The other. . . ." The cox'n stopped.

Jeff turned to him. "Can he talk?"

Cox'n shrugged. "He opened his eyes once when I got on the raft. Didn't say anything."

"Well, we'll see what hot blankets and a tot will do." Jeff looked keenly at his cox'n. "What's up with your arm?"

"I ripped it a bit climbing on the raft. He was fairly heavy that dead one. He was tied on, too."

"Have you cut it badly?"

"No, sir, bit of a splinter in it. I'll fix it when Number One has dealt with the *Caswell* men."

"Mind you do. Good work, Cox'n . . . yes?" He went off at a tangent as a faint voice came up a voice pipe.

"Number One here, sir. I've got a bit out of him. She was torpedoed at daybreak. Two torpedoed. Went down in less than a minute. He's out again, but I'm working on him."

"Splendid."

The lieutenant-commander thrust the door open with a bang, raced across the floor around the large chart table and thrust the sheet of signal-pad into the senior officer's hand.

"*Charon* to . . . um . . . torpedoed. . . ."

He handed the signal over to his colleague. "That answers that, doesn't it? Let Western Approaches know they have another bird in their coverts somewhere. The others revert to

normal patrol. Er . . . hm, what's the name of that trawler again? Who is in command?"

One hundred miles north of the Shetlands Jeff stood on the foredeck of *Charon*. Facing him was a group of her crew. Resting on the rails was an inanimate form shrouded in the White Ensign.

"... We commit his body to the deep. . . ."

Jeff read the words slowly and Allen signalled slightly to the two seamen who were holding the inboard end of the board on which the body rested. They tilted it, the canvas-wrapped figure slipped slowly over the side as the signalman recovered the White Ensign. There was a sullen splash, a train of white bubbles followed the body down. The sea had received its own.

The little group started to disperse. Jeff closed his book and handed it to the signalman. "Put that in my book rack, will you." He turned to Number One. "I noticed Cox'n was nursing his arm. Is it as bad as that?"

"Doesn't look much, sir. A smallish wound, looks like a rip, but he says it's painful right up to the shoulder."

"I'll see it, now."

Allen hurried along the small stone quay, clambered on board and went down the ward-room.

"Well?" Jeff almost barked it.

Allen shrugged. "The doctor—seems a bright sort of bloke—says the arm is deeply infected right to the shoulder. He says there is not much he can do except open it up, clean it and whisk Cox'n to hospital to Scapa or the mainland."

Allen paused and Jeff sensed he had something more to add. "Go on."

"There's not a lot more. I asked him point blank and he said there is a fifty-fifty chance of saving his arm."

"I see," Jeff said slowly. "There was nothing more we could have done?" It was partly defence, partly a question.

"He says not."

Jeff moved towards the sideboard. "Gin, Number One?"

"Please."

Jeff handed him the drink.

"Any other news?"

A broad smile spread over Allen's face.

"We sail at 1400 hours for Aberdeen. Boiler clean."

"That should gladden your heart, Number One."

On the messdeck the steward gathered his audience importantly.

"Number One's back. They're going to take Cox'n's arm off. It's badly defected. It's a fifty-fifty chance he'll get over it. Number One says. . . ."

"An' I says it's this bloody ship. Must have somebody. She's a blood-sucker. I've told you all along. Must have somebody."

The chief, who had undertaken the cox'n's duty of issuing the rum, held his cigarette like a point stabbing it towards the several members of the circle.

"Could be you, or you . . . or me. It'll be somebody every trip. I'm putting in a 'request' right away."

The steward remembered his other item of news.

"Oh! We're sailing at 1600 for Aberdeen for boiler clean, Number One said."

"That's if we get there," the chief amended gloomily. "Well, I'll away. I've a defect list to make out. As long as my arm, it is."

The mention of the limb brought back a recollection of the cox'n.

"I wouldn't give him a fifty-fifty chance. Bloody blood-sucker this ship."

As *Charon* slowly ranged alongside the quay at Aberdeen a bright young sub-lieutenant climbed on board.

"I'm sorry, sir. Your boiler clean is cancelled . . . fini. . . . You bunker up immediately and sail for Norway. I've brought you all the charts you'll want."

"Norway!"

Allen and Jeff echoed it simultaneously.

"Yes. Haven't you heard? Hitler has invaded Norway and we are invited to the party. Chamberlain says Hitler has missed the bus."

He smiled brightly, then went on, "But I've caught mine. Here is the book of words, and the charts. Have a good time."

Allen and Jeff were momentarily speechless.

Later the chief asked dourly, "What'll I do with my defect list?"

Number One told him, advising a physically impossible feat, but the verbal direction afforded Allen some crumb of comfort.

"Prisoner. A-a-bow' turn. Quick march."

Cater swung around smartly to the Master-at-Arm's barked command and marched from the room.

"Just one of those problems for which we seem to have no answer." The captain R.N. leaned back in his chair and looked up at his executive officer. "Here we have a man who climbs up to petty officer in just over three months and then goes on the run. He is caught and disgraced to leading seaman. He accepts that and for a time seems to be keeping to the straight and narrow. Just when he is about to be promoted again he goes on the run once more. Why? Women? Drink? Or just plain bloody mindedness. Has he given you the slightest hint?"

"No, sir. He just keeps his mouth shut like a trap."

The Executive had a depressingly long list to place before the captain and had no time for detailed analysis.

"Er, Stoker Pembroke, sir. Under the influence of drink so as to be unable to perform his duty, assaulting the petty officer in charge of the picket, and missing his draft."

"Bring him in," the captain said wearily. "And there was a man who was being considered for promotion to skipper. Er . . . not the stoker . . . Cater . . . all right, all right. Bring the stoker in."

And Ted Cater sat rigid in his small, bare cell starting sixty days cells with black bitterness in his heart. Slowly, extracting every ounce of gall out of the recollection he back tracked over

the events. He recalled the first letters from her. They had been cold, recriminating, accusing. He had accepted them grimly promising himself, and her, that when he had travelled the road back he would make it up. Then had come the short, almost terse letter asking him to give her freedom.

It was that letter which had fermented, twisted his mind until he had deserted from *Oxwich* and had stowed away on a merchant ship with the vague idea of getting back to England to see her, to plead, to ask for time, for faith in his ability to make good. Inevitable arrest and disrating had followed.

Finally he had got leave and had travelled to solve the silence. The house had been closed, blinds drawn. But for a lucky chance-meeting with a taxi driver he would not have known where to start looking. The driver remembered her luggage had been labelled 'Sandown, Isle of Wight'.

"Gorn from the bombing, no doubt. And I don't blame her. It was terrible. Night after night."

The first dawning suspicion, torn out at first and cast away, had returned with overwhelming force when he went to Christian's office.

The secretary's welcome had been warmly tumultuous. "Pity you missed Mr. Christian," she had chattered on. "He's away doing a consulting job for the Admiralty. He's seeing some new ships the Admiralty are building."

"Pity. When will he be back."

"Perhaps not for two or three weeks. Would you like to have his address?" She had referred to a book and scribbled it down for him.

It was an hotel in Sandown, Isle of Wight.

Suspicion, hanging on grimly by a finger-tip hold made it an unshakeable vice-like grip when no answer had come to his letters.

He had failed to return from leave and had been picked up trying to reach the Isle of Wight.

And this was the end. The finish embodied in a few short sentences in her ultimate brief letter.

* * * * *

I never want to see you again. You MUST divorce me. The evidence is there and Ben will pay all the expenses.

She had omitted to mention that Christian knew nothing of this: had omitted to mention her fears that Christian's ardour was dying, that divorce and remarriage spelled her hope of holding on to the trawler owner.

And Cater didn't know it either.

When he was permitted to write his first letter from the naval prison it was short.

Go ahead. Fix it.

CHAPTER X

CAPTAIN BRIAN LODGEWAY CAMPBELL, R.N., Captain Patrols, leaned back in his swivel chair. As he read the successive sheets of buff paper clipped together in a folder he softly pinched his bottom lip between finger and thumb.

Finally he reached the last page, let the folder close and rested it on his knees. On a two-inch square label was 'Charon'.

"Well, Sec., that's the effect. What is the cause? On paper we have what our new allies would call 'one hell of a ship'. Have you any suggestion to make?"

Paymaster Lieutenant Corder, secretary to Captain Patrols, shifted his weight from one foot to another and paused before he answered. At last he spoke.

"In a few words, no sir. At least, not anything I describe as logical or according to K.R. and A.I., or anything I can suggest as an immediate remedy."

"What have you got hold of that IS illogical or not according to the Book? Tell me. If it holds water at all I'll jolly soon make it according to Hoyle. The pattern at the moment doesn't make sense. Here we have a ship which in a bit over two years of its commission has climbed to the heights and dropped to the depths."

He tapped the folder now resting on his knee and half open again.

"Sit down, Sec. Let's pull this thing to bits and perhaps in the rebuilding we'll . . . we'll. . ."

" . . . Remould it nearer to the heart's desire'," the paymaster officer said as he pulled up a chair to the side of the table and sat down.

"Sounds like a bit of poetry, Sec." Captain Patrols chuckled. "But it gets my idea."

He laid the folder on his desk and ran his finger down the closely typed and tabulated entries.

"Commissioned Clyde, November 1940. . . . Work-up, fair to good . . . um . . . Belfast . . . see she had a bit of trouble. Stoker died after an accident in the engine room . . . went to Northern patrols . . . yes . . . good work. See? Commanding officer was commended for smart bit of work finding survivors of *Caswell Castle*. I knew her, Sec. Hoped I would have got her, or another like her. My Lords said otherwise. Billy Mason was her captain. . . . Remember him on destroyers . . . played a good game of polo. Rough and tough man in a rugby scrum too. Um . . . put her cox'n ashore at Lerwick, arm injury, another seaman also with arm injury. What the devil? Practising judo or something? I see she did some very sound work in Norway. We had trawlers doing cruisers' jobs there, Sec. That was when Arab's man got his V.C. . . . Ah, I see she lost an officer over the side. A sub-lieutenant Perrott . . . a V.R. laddie. Get me the file on that by and by, Sec. . . . Commanding officer got a D.S.C. for his part up there. Must have earned it, too . . . um . . . and there again, too. Chief engineman disrated to leading stoker . . . went adrift . . . I'll want more of that also. Then her troubles seem to have started."

"I think 'increased' would be a better word, sir," the paymaster said softly.

"Eh? What d'you mean. Perhaps you're right. But look at it, man. Look at it." Captain Patrols stabbed the folder with a stiff finger. "At sea she is a capable ship. In harbour the men seem to be just a bloody-minded lot of swabs. In just under two years

she's had practically a complete new crew—what with men going under punishment and putting in for 'requests' and she's still under a cloud. How many have I got this time, Sec?"

His secretary shrugged. "A round half dozen, sir."

"What for?"

"The usual. 'Persistent overstaying leave', 'Fighting', 'Refusing duty when called upon'. . . . And a round half dozen of 'requests' to top it up, sir."

"'Overstaying leave', 'fighting', 'refusing duty'. It's like a disease, Sec. Men with sound records are sent to her and in a few weeks I have them up before me. Nothing wrong with the officers is there? Can't be."

The paymaster shook his head and Captain Patrols went on.

"I thought not. Struck me as a sound lot. Well, when I get that bunch before me . . . bring me some nails and a hammer. I'll crucify them."

"They'll love it, so long as it means leaving the ship, sir."

Captain Patrols fumbled in his pocket until he found a well-charred briar pipe. Thoughtfully he filled it as his eyes travelled once more down the lines of typewritten history of the ship. When his pipe was drawing to his satisfaction he leaned back again.

"That's something I do not understand. Usually, when a man has a bit of a grievance he shoves in his request and half the time he means it only as an implied threat. He is saying, 'blimy, unless things alter here, I'm handing in my cards'. When his request comes up he has a chance to air his views and goes away happy. But. . . ." The pipe demanded his attention for a few moments. "But even when I hint that some of them will end up at Scapa on a boom defence ship, or out in Freetown they smile broadly and push their requests."

He suddenly slapped the table. "There MUST be a reason not obvious on the surface, Sec. And I mean to find it."

Captain Patrols looked at the wall clock before him.

"What time am I seeing her commanding officer?"

"Fifteen hundred hours, sir." The secretary hesitated, opened his mouth to say something, but stopped before he had articulated

a comprehensible sound. Captain Patrols eyed him shrewdly.

"What were you going to say, Scratch?" The paymaster lieutenant smiled momentarily. He recognized the diminutive, the semi-affectionate name for paymasters in the navy and he knew that when Captain Patrols abandoned 'Sec.' for 'Scratch' it meant, "Come on. This is man to man."

Captain Campbell slid a silver cigarette box across to the other officer.

"Help yourself, Scratch. They're 'Chesterfields'," he said cunningly. "A bit of 'lease and lend' which came my way. Now. What valuable contribution were you going to make?"

The paymaster inhaled and blew out the smoke in a long thin column which climbed towards the ceiling. He turned and looked at the clock.

"D'you mind if I start at the beginning, sir?"

"Hell of a good place to start anything. The floor is yours."

"I remember this ship coming to Belfast, sir. I was based there then. We had a couple of R.N.R. skippers commanding local escort and patrol trawlers. I used to go on board—helping them out with R.N. routine and their paper work. . . . Pardon, sir?"

"I said 'and their gin, no doubt', but carry on, Sec."

The paymaster smiled. "Occasionally, the odd nip, sir. But my point is this. When those skippers heard that *Charon* was in commission and was coming to us they . . . well, they waxed eloquent. They knew her. One of them commanded an old, battered trawler with wheezy engines, hand steering, on her last legs, but he swore that if he was transferred to *Charon* he would do anything to get out of her, even to the extent of going adrift."

He paused for a moment to study Captain Patrols' face, but got no clue from that.

"They told me some grim stories about her. Apparently a man was killed when she was being launched. There is some superstitious nonsense that if a ship kills a man when she is being built or being launched then she. . . ."

"It's not nonsense, Sec.," Captain Campbell broke in.

"Far from it. Don't ask me to explain it. But I know. . . ." He propped his chin on his hand with his elbow on the arm of the chair.

"There was *Wangler*—destroyer—well before your time. Her yard put everything into her. Everything of the best. She killed a man, a painter I think, a day before her trials. From then onwards she lived in blood. Time and again she maimed men, killed some. Two first-class commanding officers were broken by her . . . she left her marks on another. . . ."

Captain Patrols' blue eyes were staring out of the window of the office, staring out but seeing nothing, his mind was many years back.

"She went in a grandstand finish. Broke her back in a typhoon. Lost thirty odd of the crew. I can think. . . ." Abruptly he swung his eyes back into the present, into the room.

"Go on, Sec."

"Since then I've listened to odd fragments—sort of built up a case history of her before the war. I would say she was like that destroyer you mentioned, sir. The . . . the. . . ."

"*Wangler*. Go on."

"*Charon* killed two or three men, lost one over the side, maimed others and her last skipper put her ashore when he was blind drunk. I'm sorry, sir. I'm subscribing to their legend. Shall I say two or three men were killed on her, one was lost overboard and others were hurt."

The paymaster lieutenant's precise mind, trained to hard dogmatic figures and books declined to offer tenancy for more than a fleeting moment to any misty superstition.

Captain Patrols tapped his teeth with a thumbnail.

"Don't split hairs, Scratch. The first way will do for me." Again his eyes were looking out of the window, but looking into the past.

"Her history in naval service. You have that, sir," the paymaster said rather primly as if he felt rather ashamed of submitting such an old wives' tale as a solution.

Captain Campbell turned to the folder, ran a finger-tip down the items, stopping occasionally to read in detail.

"She's running true to form, isn't she?" It was a soft aside not requiring an answer from the other.

Suddenly the older man slapped the folder down on his desk, placed his hands widely either side of it and leaned forward. It hunched his shoulders up close behind his ears, gave him an appearance of thrustful pugnacity.

"What time . . . ? 1500 you said. Good. His name is . . . Jeff? Good."

Lieutenant Corder stubbed out his cigarette and stood up.

"The 'request men' and the naughty boys, sir? We have them down for 15.15 hours. Would you like that amended?"

Captain Campbell looked shrewdly at the bland face of his secretary.

"Do you think it will take me more than quarter of an hour to thrash this out with Jeff?"

"I couldn't say, sir? I don't know what you have in mind."

"Don't you?" Captain Patrols chuckled. "I'll bet you have a damned good idea, Sec."

"Indeed, sir." Corder was strictly non-committal.

"Indeed." Captain Campbell mimicked. "Put 'request men' back fifteen minutes. The others, make it . . . er . . . 1600. And you might start the buzz going that I'm in a man-eating rage. Biting heads off right, left and centre without bothering about salt. Let 'em sweat a bit. It does 'em good sometimes."

Corder inclined his head and moved towards the door.

"Biting heads off as you say, sir."

"And stop acting like a butler in a Noël Coward show, Scratch. How many 'request men' did you say?"

"Six 'requests', sir." Corder paused with his hand on the door-knob. "One will intrigue you. It's from the commanding officer."

"Hold it, Scratch," Campbell barked. "Commanding officers don't fill in. . . ."

"Not strictly speaking a 'request', sir. It's more a formal note asking you to approve his application for another command."

"All right. Show him in when he arrives. That's given me the germ of an idea."

"That is what I thought, sir."

"Now say 'dinner is served', act two, scene three and you will be word perfect for the part."

"Yes, sir," Corder replied gravely struggling to submerge a twinkle in his eyes.

The door closed with a faint click behind him.

Campbell leaned back in his chair, probed into the bowl of his pipe and found it wanting. Slowly he reached for his pouch, went through the ritual abstractedly while his eyes ran down the page of the folder again.

"It might be a sound idea at that," he mused then concentrated on directing the flaring match on its objective.

Lieutenant Jeff, R.N.R., stared out of the window although there was little to see but wind-swept, black-brown hills and dingy grey cliffs darkly shadowed in the cold northern light.

Inside the officer's club it was warm, colourful and comfortable although it was only a large nissen hut.

The first time he had encountered this large, curved corrugated hut he and Allen, ashore in a northern base for a short afternoon's leg stretch, had chuckled at the rather ornate, elaborate sign 'Officer's Club' fastened to the front of one of the huts. But once inside they had marvelled. The hut was lined and the decorative scheme, cream walls, red carpets, red-topped tables, soft lighting and a roaring open fire fairly shouted 'comfort'.

Once inside the porch they had stood and drunk it all in, from the deep club easy chairs, the brightly lighted bar, the postage stamp sized dance floor, the deep settees in front of the fire.

"What has the Savoy got that this hasn't?" Jeff had asked.

"Taxis outside, rationing and fair ladies," was Allen's answer. "Belay on the 'fair ladies'," he had added as an attractive WRNS officer detached herself from a group at the bar and moved towards them.

"Welcome, strangers." She had aided the words with a warm smile. "Passing through?"

"Not on your life," Allen had answered sturdily. "We're inhabitants." The girl's raised eyebrows he met with the added remark, "At least we're going to be. We're going to be from today. We're like the man with the red nose at the Salvation Army meeting. We're 'newly jined'."

"Welcome twice, then," the girl had offered. "The club has only been open a week. The Admiralty put it here, NAAFI run it and I have been elected 'Amenities Officer'. If you have any suggestions about . . . about improvements . . . or . . . amenities, then I'm your gal," she had concluded brightly.

"I can think of one right away," Allen had smiled.

"Yes?"

"If you had a sister and she. . . ."

The girl gurgled. "I haven't, but we have a Wren officer's mess—about thirty of us. That is a nissen hut also. You must come to tea one afternoon. In the meantime let me buy you your first drink. I insist."

As they moved up towards the small bar Allen had dug his commanding officer in the ribs in a most democratic fashion.

"All the horrors of war. Wonderful isn't it?"

"If you kept your eyes at eye level for a while it might be something," Jeff had answered coldly as they waited for the girl to order the drinks. "In a few seconds you've roved from . . . from. . . ."

"Truck to keel you're trying to say. But I'll bet you that without another look I can tell you the colour of her eyes and her hair."

"Go ahead."

"Blue and . . . and a sort of russety red."

"An optical freak obviously."

Allen had ignored the gibe and Jeff had continued remorselessly. "Another bet I'll make is that you have a shrewd idea of all other essential measurements."

A wide smile split Allen's face.

"Indeed. From ankles and all stations north."

They had moved to the bar where the girl had bought the drinks.

"Chin chin. I hope you like it here," she had said with raised glass. "What is the name of your ship?"

"*Charon*." They had spoken simultaneously.

"*Charon*!" Jeff had looked keenly at her. Did he detect a momentary look of surprise? Perhaps the girl was conscious of his swift but sharp scrutiny.

"Rather an odd name for a ship. '*Charon*', the mythical ferryman who waits at the bank of the Styx. Am I correct?"

She sounded as if she was hurrying away from her momentary surprise.

"My classical education doesn't go beyond Hercules who tore lions in half and started a bee farm in them," Allen had chattered on.

"That was Samson, Biblical, you ignoramus."

"I knew it was a strong man of some sort. Used to see the picture on a treacle tin when I was a kid."

Jeff had turned to the girl with the remark, "And I have to live with him all the time."

"A fate worse than death."

"Apart from its mythological origin did her name ring a bell at all?" Jeff had pressed.

She paused momentarily, ran the pink tip of her tongue gently along her top lip.

"No-no." She had followed the denial with a swift smile. "Part of my job is route-ing. You should see some of the names I get. I've had American ships with names like . . . er . . . *Big Foot Wallace* . . . *Kicking Horse Pass* . . . *Hiram K. Schuster*. One last week was a real lulu. It was *Maimi L. Loggerstrap*. Honestly. Where DO they get them?"

"Same place as they get the crews, I've no doubt," Allen had growled. "Same again?" jerking his chin at their glasses. "If any ship makes an Aunt Fanny's rollicking mess in a convoy you can bet your boots it's a Yank. You did say a pink gin, didn't you?" As he stepped towards the bar he said, "Tell her about *Anna Karenia*."

"The story of *Anna Karenia* please," she had insisted.

"Oh Allen treats it as a special joke. We had taken a couple

of stragglers to Loch Ewe and anchored. It was pitch dark. We were tired and we had scarcely set anchor watch when a shore station piped up 'You are lying too close to *Anna Karenia*'. Number One took a good look and decided we were not. The station came up again with the same signal. Number One, fed up answered, 'Yes, ain't love grand'. There was a hell of a row about it, but he still thinks it is a first-class joke."

"It closed him down for the rest of the night," Allen had said rejoining them in time to hear the end. "And that was the main point. Cheerio."

From that evening onwards the officer's club became their Mecca. It was the one bright spot in their existence.

Jeff's recollections wandered on to Perrott's introduction to the warming atmosphere. It was shortly after Midslupman Mason, R.N.V.R., was added to the officer strength.

A long and wearying convoy job had been successfully concluded. Arrears of sleep had been adjusted and Jeff and Allen were sitting in the ward-room discussing a jaunt ashore.

"What say we take the child, sir?" Allen has asked blandly. 'He's old enough to face the sterner facts of life. Mason is officer of the day so we can show Perrott some of the sights. . . ."

" . . . The scenes of your debauchery. I wandered ashore last time in. I saw the waving palms, coral strands, hula hula girls. Listen to the sun shining." He put his head one side and lifted a finger in an extravagant attitude of listen.

Even down in the ward-room they could hear the heavy drumming of the rain and the whine of the wind.

Jeff had smiled and Allen's contribution had been a full-throated laugh.

"Not me," Perrott had continued. "I can buy myself a drink right here at tuppence h'penny and be comfortable."

"I think a jaunt ashore would be good for you, m'lad," Jeff had pressed, an underlying note of seriousness in his voice. To his certain knowledge Perrott had been ashore twice in the past four months. "I think you're right Number One. We'll take him to the Officer's Club. Perhaps there'll be a dance going. . . ."

"There's one absolute tip topper of a third officer Wren, blonde, about so high, moves like a fairy. She's mine . . . all mine." Allen had craftily sown his seed.

"My money goes on the red head," Jeff cunningly added weight. "When she walks. . . ."

"These I must see," Perrott capitulated. "If they can stir the sluggish blood of old men like . . . like . . . some I could mention then they'll set me on fire. A moment while my man girds me in my drop of Sunday best and I'm yours."

"Floreat the Pride of Richmond Palaise de Hop," Allen had jeered after Perrott's retreating back.

And the youngster had enjoyed himself, had kept the radiogram constantly at work and had not missed a dance. Most of his dances had been with one girl, she was neither blonde nor red head, but Perrott didn't seem to mind.

One day at sea, a couple of months later when Allen and Jeff were on the bridge together Allen had said: "The youngsters are taking me for a ride, I think. Apparently young Mason doesn't care much for our shore amenities and he and Perrott have struck a bargain. Mason does a number of Sub's O.O.D.'s and Perrott is going to take Mason's turn as Care and Maintenance when we go on boiler clean."

"Is that all right with you?" If Number One was satisfied Jeff had no objection.

"Oh, it's quite O.K. But I wondered why. I found out the other evening when we were at the club. That black-haired siren Perrott spends all his time with comes from Aberdeen. They are gambling on her being able to get her leave the same time. . . ."

"That presupposes we will go to Aberdeen, of course, for our boiler clean and leave. They might do us at the base."

"God forbid," Allen had said fervently. "We do get some defects remedied at Aberdeen. Even so," he went on. "They'll be on a winner."

Footsteps on the bridge ladder behind them had made them turn and Perrott arrived to start his watch.

"The C.O. and I have been discussing your attempts and

plans to embroil an innocent girl," Allen had said innocently.

Perrott had blushed and stammered. "I-I . . . I don't. . . ."

"You know the drill?" Allen had continued shamelessly. "Request permission from the commanding officer, and if he approves then you must have the banns of marriage exhibited in a public convenience for three weeks. Come to me in the later stages and I will advise you, step by step."

Perrott had still struggled in an inarticulate way making vague motions with his arms. Finally he had blurted, "I've said nothing about getting married. And how did you find out?"

"When a girl spends two dances walking on my feet and her only topic is you—and leave—I'm entitled to make deductions."

"She danced with you because she was sorry for you," Perrott had defended vigorously. "Your blonde was dancing all night with an American officer. And. . . ."

"Lcase and lend," Allen had replied loftily. "She was after nylon stockings."

Jeff had leaned against the bridge rail enjoying the little by-play.

"How old are you, Sub?"

"I'm twenty-two . . . and a half, sir."

"All right, Granpa. Come and take a look at this chart and these orders," Allen had interjected turning to business. As they had entered the little Asdic hut Jeff had heard him add, "And if you see anything shining in the night don't report it as mysterious lights. It will be you dreaming of two lustrous bright eyes. Just carry. . . ."

The door had clicked behind them leaving the bridge to Jeff.

Later, just before he went below he had seen Perrott wipe his forehead.

"Number One making you sweat, Sub?"

"Hardly, sir. I've lived long enough with him to put up with his ribbing. I think I have a cold coming on. I seem to be running a bit of a temperature."

"See me when you come off watch. I'll take it. I'll be reading in my room should you want me."

"Aye, aye, sir."

His temperature that night was 101.

"Sir, sir." Jeff clawed his way up from a deep sleep to find the steward standing near his settee. "Cup of tea, sir. It's quarter to eight. And Number One said to tell you that he thinks Mr. Perrott is not fit to take a watch. He looks downright ill to me, sir."

In little more than twelve hours Perrott's temperature had jumped to nearly 103. Jeff had stepped back to study the clinical thermometer, had pursed his lips and watched Perrott. His eyes were unnaturally bright, his lips dry, slightly apart and he was breathing in short, heavy gasps.

"You'll have to stay in your cart for a watch or two, Sub. You've got flu."

On the bridge he had taken a more serious note.

"I don't like it, Number One. What time have we a rendezvous today? Um. Six hours' time. She'll have a doctor, thank the Lord. How did you find out he was ill?"

"Mason sent the steward up. He said Sub was breathing heavily and looked right off the wicket. He seemed all right last night."

"I took his temperature last night when he came off watch. It was just touching 101. This morning it's up to 103.

"Good Lord." Allen's head had jerked up. "What . . . ?"

"I'm not certain. But, it looks like pneumonia."

"What's the drill for that, sir?"

"Ice bags, hot-water bottles, keep him warm and comfortable. Less than nothing, actually. That damned A.M.L. couldn't be a couple of hours early this time could she?"

The word went round the ship. It was like a minor crisis or trouble in a village. Intimate, personal, the stewards retailing the smallest item of symptom, treatment, reaction, every spoken word.

"Number One's sitting over him like an old hen. Wiping Sub's lips with a bit o' lint, giving him a drink, drying his forehead and him with his eyes out on his check. Sub's eyes look like cinders in snow."

Chief's audience had been receptive, hanging on to his every gloomy word. He had *Charon's* history at his finger-tips. He had every smallest mishap tabulated ready to bear weight on his dire recital.

"And now this. Mark what I say. She'll get him. Sooner I'm out of this ship the better. Sooner we're all out of her before she does us all the better it will be."

At 1500 that afternoon *Charon* was diverted by wireless from her rendezvous point to investigate a reported object believed to be a raft with a man on it.

"Another damned R.A.F. sighting," Allen had snarled.

"Last time the man waving turned out to be a sea bird on a plank flapping its wings. Don't they realize that a couple of minutes' flight for them is hours of steaming for us. Tell 'em to go to hell, sir. Let's contact the cruiser, get the doctor, then make a search."

Jeff's answer had been frigid. Down the voice pipe to the wheel he had barked: "Steer North 50 East."

Charon swung around obediently to near 90 degrees away from her previous course.

"Double bank the look-outs, Number One. Mr. Mason, work out the distance and correct course to that sighting."

Allen's hands had clenched. "Unless we get the doctor soon. . . ."

"Lieutenant Allen. Will you tell the engine room I want 120 revs." Jeff's voice had tinkled with ice.

"Very good, sir."

"North 52 East will take us there, sir," Mason's voice broke in from the chart room window. "Distance thirty-two miles."

"Engine room? Increase to 120 revs. Thirty-two soul-searing miles. Two hours search, and thirty-two miles back. Nearly eight hours. Because some blasted Brylcreem boy sees a gannet flapping on a box. Christ!"

Allen's raging comment was barely audible. Jeff had slid a quick glance at him.

"Very well, Mr. Mason. Enter it in the log. Altered course 15.02 to whatever it is. Visibility 1,000 yards. Sea mist closing in."

"Aye, aye, sir."

Allen and Jeff had stood side by side not saying a word, Allen with his hands thrust deeply into his duffel pocket.

Finally, "I'll stay up here for a while with Mason. You go below. Take a look at Perrott."

"Aye, aye, sir."

Allen had turned away. As he did so Jeff had followed him to the top of the bridge ladder.

"Number One."

"Sir."

"Look after him, chum."

Dutifully *Charon* had slipped through the tenuous grey mist to the estimated position. Baffled eyes searched every sullen rolling sea. In their hearts they knew that it was a hopeless quest. So many times they had been sent on wild-goose chases investigating surfaced submarines which proved to be debris. Rafts with men waving which turned out to be shell and weed encrusted wreckage on which sea birds rested and stretched their wings. There had been the memorable occasion when they had received a wireless message to investigate an R.A.F. report of a suspicious surface craft.

Jeff had gone to immediate action stations because the reported position was near them. Finally, when various aircraft had circled them, warily it had dawned on them that they were the suspicious surface craft.

"It's that fierce beard of yours, Sub," Allen had jibed. "You'd better arrange for a couple of hands to walk the plank when that Wimpey comes around again."

Perrott had capitulated and had later shaved off the inconspicuous down he had been cherishing.

Methodically, meticulously, like a ploughman travelling up and down across a field Jeff searched a box around the area. Visibility shrunk to a few hundred yards as they steamed through the white legacy from the ice field to the north. It was like teased-out cotton wool, writhing away from the ship, closing in behind her after she had passed.

Jeff extended the search period to three hours. Through

his mind ran the theme, there will be nothing of course, but . . . that inevitable but there MIGHT be. So, on with the search. Every hour away from his rendezvous with the armed merchant cruiser decreased Perrott's chances. As he searched he plotted in his mind a more northerly return journey. Perhaps the cruiser had loitered, perhaps he could intercept her on her patrol going back up. Perhaps. . . .

"Objec' right ahead, sir. Raft, looks like."

The flat voice of a look-out had broken in on his planning.

It had proved to be a raft, weed and shell fish encrusted, with a drum lashed upright at one end of it.

"Looks as if it has been sculling around for a couple of years," Jeff had remarked as they ran up to it. "I must say that with a bird perched on that drum and flapping it's wings it would look like a man on his knees waving his arms." Suddenly he had turned to Mason.

"Sink it. We'll have it reported again sometime if we don't."

The gunners had riddled it with Oerlikon fire until the punctured drums had filled and slowly it disappeared.

"That's that." A quick mental calculation had flitted through Jeff's mind. "Now, Mr. Mason. Work me out a course to intercept the cruiser forty miles north of our rendezvous. I'll check it later. Wheel? Alter course to North 15 West."

Presently, "North 15 West on, sir."

Night had joined forces with the heavy mist so that she seemed to be steaming along in the middle of a grey-black pall, seemed to be carrying it along with her. The only evidence of movement had been the flash of white from the bow wave as it rolled along her side.

For nearly four hours her engines had thudded out to their uttermost.

Once Jeff had sent Mason down from the bridge for a report on Perrott's condition.

Mason had said, "Number One has the light covered with a towel, sir. It seemed quiet in there. Number One was sitting in the chair. I could hear nothing so I came away softly."

Jeff had nodded approval and a feeling of warm regard for Allen had grown in his heart.

It was near midnight when he had heard a swift scutter of feet up the bridge ladder, had heard someone panting for breath.

"He's gone. I can't find him anywhere." Allen had gasped it out as he had hung on the ladder hand-rail. "I thought he might be. . . ."

Jeff had grasped him by both shoulders.

"What's wrong? What's up with Perrott?"

Allen had sagged and had shaken his head.

"I've searched the ship. He's gone . . . gone somewhere."

"Mason. Take two hands. Search the ship. Search everywhere. Heads, bathroom, my berth, everywhere. Don't miss a place."

"Aye, aye, sir."

"Now, Number One." The tones were flat, emotionless, commanding. "When?"

Allen lifted his head from his arm.

"He was a bit restless when you shot up that raft. Started talking wildly about action stations. I quietened him down, covered the light with a towel and he seemed to be more restful. I sat in the chair. I must have dozed off. I woke up a little while ago. He wasn't in his bunk. I searched around. Tried all the places I could think of . . . everywhere. . . . He's gone . . . he's over the side . . . over the side I tell you. . . ."

"Steady." Like the crack of a whip. "You've no idea of the time? About how long ago did you drop off to sleep?"

Allen pondered wearily.

"What is it now?"

"Getting on for midnight."

"God. I must have been asleep for nearly four hours. We must turn around. We must search. . . ."

Jeff had looked over the side into the twisting writhing mist. Search in this? Where? How far back? The questions had tumbled over themselves.

"Wheel? Hard to starboard. Steady on South 75 East."
"Hard's starb'd on, sir. Steady on South 75 East."

The Court of Inquiry completely cleared Jeff. The evidence had been given in calm sentences by he and Allen. There had been no mention of the emotional outburst at dawn when Number One had cracked up, had fought with Jeff when he finally gave an alteration of course away from the area.

Nobody was to blame. A doctor had said that delirium in pneumonia cases frequently made people climb out of bed, show a sudden and short-lived resurgence of strength.

When the Court was over, sympathetic officers had gathered around Jeff, had shaken him by the hand and when they had moved away spoke among themselves. "Bad show. But she's a bloody unlucky ship, I've heard. Bloody unlucky."

One tapped Jeff on the shoulder. "Oh, we've picked up that chief engineman of yours. We caught him at Aberdeen. He had been on a three-day bender. Let's see? He's been adrift for more than a week, hasn't he? He'll be for the high jump."

Jeff had missed Allen after the Court of Inquiry and several hours later had found him at the officer's club. One look was enough. For the first time in his life Allen was drunk.

"I . . . know wha . . . what you're going to shay . . . say. Don't thatsh . . . that's all. Leave it. Have a drink?"

Allen had attempted to climb to his feet, half succeeded but had then subsided back into his chair.

"I'm going to have onc. I need it. You've had enough. One and then we go back on board."

Before Jeff could move away Allen had grabbed his arm. Where before his talk had been blurred, ill controlled with a hesitant emphasis on the wrong syllables now the words had flowed from his lips. His voice had dropped to a hoarse, almost whispered growl.

"Back on board? I'm not going back on to that bloody death trap. G'wan! Order me to. I'll tell you to go to hell. I'll tell the Admiralty to go to hell. I'll do what the chief did.

I'll walk out on her. And on you. She's not a ship. She's a floating blood-sucker. Why the hell don't the Germans sink her? Why don't we sink her? All the crew would like to sink her. They'll all go on the run. You'll see." Swiftly his mood had changed. "If only I had heard him getting out of his bunk . . . I should have known he was restless . . . it was my fault . . . I keep seeing him struggling in the water with us steaming away from him . . . I see him when I'm awake . . . when I'm asleep. . . . All the time." His head dropped.

Jeff had remained motionless. He realized that nothing he could say would have the slightest effect. He realized that Allen was talking as a safety-valve. The drink had loosened flood gates he had kept pent up too long.

The clutching hand on his arm had released its grip. Jeff had turned, walked to the bar and ordered two drinks.

"Make them doubles."

Without a word he had put the drink by Allen's hand, had tapped him on the arm. Allen had lifted his head and had looked at it with an uncomprehending stare. Slowly his eyes had lifted, locked for a moment with Jeff's then dropped again to the glass. Suddenly, in one swift move Allen had seized it, tossed it back and had brought the empty glass back to the table with a sharp thud. Jeff had disposed of his more slowly.

When his glass was empty. "One for the road, Number One?"

Allen had slowly shaken his head.

"Let's go."

Obediently Allen had climbed to his feet, swayed and walked towards the door, lifting his feet higher than necessary with a slow deliberation. In silence they had walked to the small jetty, climbed on board the liberty drifter and had clambered on *Charon*.

Several hours later, as Jeff had been sitting in his easy chair he had heard a tap at his door and a haggard, drawn-faced Allen had entered.

Before Jeff could speak Allen had started.

"I believe I talked some rot in the club. I've a vague recollection of saying . . . saying . . ."

Allen had stopped as if struggling for a few words to describe baldly his earlier outburst.

Jeff had smiled and hooked a chair around with his foot.

"Did you? I forget. Squat, Number One. Have a heart starter. Help yourself and pour one for me."

Allen had poured out one drink and handed it to Jeff.

"Not for me, thanks." He had stood in silence for a few moments. "I'm not quite certain of procedure for officers, but, this is a request. I want a move to another ship. . . ." He stopped Jeff's protest with an upraised hand. "Please, sir. I mean it. I've been lying down thinking it over."

The long argument which had followed had failed to shake Allen and finally Jeff had capitulated.

A sympathetic Captain Patrols, who could shrewdly see much further than the end of his nose on a dark night had, listened to Jeff's more or less formal request.

"Well, Jeff. As a matter of fact I can do something almost immediately. This Number One of yours. He has a fair amount of seniority. Is he fit for command, think you?"

Without hesitation Jeff had answered. "Every time, sir."

"So. You see, a lot of trawler commanding officers are being shifted to larger commands, corvettes and the new frigates. Some are getting the half ring. We've been asked to recommend R.N.V.R. officers for command; some to trawlers and others to corvettes. Of course, the thing to do would be to put you forward for a frigate or corvette and leave him to command. . . ."

"I'm afraid not, sir. I would prefer to stay with her. He must . . . wants . . . to go elsewhere. I think it better."

"Not anything incompatible between you two? No. I rather thought not. Very well, leave it to me, *Charon*."

Allen had departed. As the hour for his leaving had drawn closer Jeff felt a foretaste of the loss, the gap Allen's absence would make in his life. For more than two years they had been friends as well as Commanding Officer and Number One. They

had reached a degree of intimacy in which they almost learned to know what one another was thinking.

Allen had to catch the evening liberty boat, with his luggage, to go on leave before proceeding to his new command. They had sat in the ward-room, mainly in silence, each dreading the moment when they would have to clasp hands and say 'good-bye'. Once Allen had felt in his pockets, failed to locate his cigarette case and subconsciously had moved towards his room. When he had pulled the curtain to one side and saw the empty room he stopped, held the curtain for a moment, dropped it and turned around.

"Look's a bit funny without all my odds and sods in it. I must have packed my cigarette case away."

'It will be funny without you around, odds and sods and all,' Jeff had thought and next moment he jerked up. It had been as if Allen had heard his innermost thoughts because he continued on the trend.

"It will be odd for a while, not being here. Not having all the old problems . . . the leak in the foredeck I never did find . . . the . . ." he had gestured vaguely, had examined his finger-tips for a moment then: "It's been a long time. In many ways it's been a good time. I . . . I've learned an awful lot from you, sir. I . . . I'll want it. I didn't expect a command."

"And now your troubles really start," Jeff had chuckled. "You won't be able to tap on a door and say, 'Please sir, unravel this'. You'll have to do your own unravelling."

"We will now sing 'Comfort ye, my people'," Allen had gibed. The grin had disappeared from his face. "Something worries me. Would you do one little job for me?"

"Short of murder, yes."

"That little Wren officer Perrott was friendly with. I wrote a note to her the day we got in after we . . . lost him . . . explained it all. The day of the Court of Inquiry I saw her in the club with another officer. She was laughing and joking. I . . . I'd had a few. . . ."

"Indeed you had," Jeff said drily.

Allen went on. "He left her for a while and I . . . I sort of slammed into her . . . verbally you know."

"Why?"

"I had some crazy idea that she had written him off and didn't care a damn."

"And now . . . ?"

"I've found out that she did. She took it rather badly, in her own quiet way. The laughing was part of an act."

"What do you want me to do."

"Let her know that I understand."

"I'll do that. But why not write?"

"I did try, but couldn't make it read convincing enough."

"All right."

They were saved from the last emotional strain of a lone farewell. Several officers from adjoining ships came on board for a good-bye drink with Allen and the liberty boat came alongside as they had their glasses raised.

"What's your new Number One like?" One of them had asked after Allen had departed.

"You've seen him?"

"Yes."

"Then you know as much as I do about him."

In the course of time Jeff had found that his new first lieutenant was well up in the intricacies of his job, but for one important facet. He could not handle men.

Allen, with a mixture of acid-laden invective and ridicule had jockeyed the men out of their frightened and sullen moods when something had gone wrong, when somebody had been grievously hurt, or had been killed. When Perrott had died Allen's brutal but helpful method had been absent. The sullen, frightened mood had remained, growing, festering, manifesting itself in a number of minor offences, and one or two major crimes.

The new first lieutenant had treated these coldly, formally, correctly according to the book.

Jeff, sitting in the semi-dormer window in the officer's club had reached this point in his survey as he stared out unseeingly on the bleak, windswept view.

That morning he had received a short, almost brusque memorandum from Captain Patrols stating that he wanted to see him immediately before defaulters that afternoon. Jeff had followed the practice of letting his first lieutenant accompany them, a concession which Captain Patrols had hitherto approved of.

He looked at his watch. It wanted a few minutes to 15.00. He picked up his cup, looked distastefully at the cold tea in the bottom of it, shrugged his shoulders, took his greatcoat from the back of a chair and set out on the two or three minutes walk to C.P.'s office.

"Ah. Come in, Jeff. Take a chair. I'll be with you in a moment."

Captain Patrols went on perusing a letter, signed it, rocked his curved blotter over it, tossed it into a wire basket and leaned back.

For twenty-five seconds, which seemed an age to Jeff, Captain Campbell looked at him fixedly from beneath slightly lowered lids. In that short interval he took in the taut lines around the mouth, the small compressed muscles at each corner, muscles which pulled the lips until they continued in thin, straight grooves towards the angles of the jaw. He also took in the shadowy blue-blackness beneath the eyes.

"You've been earning your keep, and then a bit, *Charon*, haven't you?"

The sudden question slightly startled Jeff. He jerked in his chair.

"Yes, sir . . . at least . . . we've . . . we've put in a fair amount of sea time."

"More than eighty per cent a month for the past six months so my records tell me." Campbell leaned forward and touched an item on a typewritten sheet in front of him. "You'd be in clover if this job paid overtime. Heard from your late Number One?"

"Yes, sir. He's been appointed to one of the new Isles class trawlers. Commissions her next week at Hull."

"I know the jobs, mixed minesweeping and Asdic. Just his weight. He's happy about it?"

"I gather so, sir, from his letter."

"Where is all this taking us?" thought Jeff. "This is just smoke-screen for something else."

Captain Campbell's next utterance confirmed this.

"That's a truly formidable list of naughty boys you have for me," he said evenly. "Some of them are repeaters. One or two are really leading with their chins, third offences."

"Yes, sir," answered Jeff miserably. Somewhere deep down in him he felt he had a ready sound defence for the inarticulate men who would later appear before Campbell, would stand woodenly while their offences were read out, would accept their punishment; would do the same thing again until they were awarded cells and would achieve what they were blindly and stupidly shooting at. Removal from the ship.

Possibly he meant to bring out some of this defence, thin as it was when he opened his mouth, but Campbell forestalled him with an upraised hand. Jeff waited.

Campbell fumbled in his pocket, found his pipe and pouch, loaded the pipe and lit it.

"Start a cigarette going *Charon*, if you wish."

Jeff realized that Campbell was making it informal. He lit a cigarette.

Campbell tamped down a glowing pyramid above the bowl of his pipe, puffed experimentally two or three times then settled down deeper in his chair.

"I've been doing a spot of telephoning and wangling this afternoon and I've accelerated something which was coming along anyway. I'm going to de-commission *Charon*. A complete clean sweep. She's overdue for it now." He broke off with a chuckle. "Some of those memorandums *re* defects from your late Number One are classics. He should have taken away copies with him for future reference."

"He has them all in his head, sir."

"Like a Queen of England who had Calais engraved on her heart, eh. Practically indelible. Well, as I was saying. This

de-commission will serve a double purpose. She can have a long refit—couple of months maybe—and a completely new crew. Start with a clean bill so to speak.”

“I’d like that, sir. The men I have are quite. . . .”

“I said a completely new crew, commanding officer included,” Campbell said levelly. “You will go on leave pending appointment to another command and—this is quite off the record—I imagine it will be one of the new frigates. You might have to go to the United States to collect her.”

Jeff sat still for a few moments, a tumult of thoughts rushing through his mind without rhyme, but with some reason. No longer would he have at the back of his every waking hour, and threading through his troubled dreams a lurking fear of what next could happen, who next would be hurt or killed.

“ . . . You’ll get all this in a signal later, but you’ll slip 0900 tomorrow morning and proceed to Aberdeen to blow down boilers and de-commission. With luck you’ll be sitting in a theatre in the West End in four days’ time.”

Jeff sat still for a moment letting the news sink in, letting the relief well around him like the first moments of a warm, refreshing bath. Then:

“About the defaulters, sir. Could I say something. . . .”

“You can. But you needn’t. I’ll tell you what I’m going to do. There’s not one of them with a record previous to joining *Charon*. Without you or I discussing it we both know the reason, or at least part of it. I should peg their hides out to dry. But . . .” Captain Campbell leaned forward, “I’m going to throw the book out of the window, give them a caution, plus a dressing down and send them on their several ways rejoicing because . . .” he tapped the desk with his finger-tip in time to his words: “because they, too, will be getting a shift. Anything you want to add to that?”

“No, sir.”

“I thought not.”

“Good. Well. On your way, Jeff. Your Number One can cope when they come before me.” He stood up and held out his hand. “Good luck.”

As Jeff closed the door behind him Captain Campbell walked towards the window.

"Wangler, you hell-ridden bitch, this pipes the eye of one of your breed. If only somebody had. . . ." His half whispered sentence died away as a far-off look stole back into his eyes.

CHAPTER XI

SOME weeks later Lieutenant Oliver Paton, R.N.V.R., sat in a corner seat in a darker corner of the Main and High club within a stone's throw of Piccadilly Circus. Until the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbour it had been called The Two Blues with a crudely painted picture of a naval officer and a R.A.F. pilot decorating the distempered wall behind the bar.

The black-haired, sallow-faced, paunchy man who owned the club had altered it from The Three Arms and had effaced the figure in khaki when the military medical board had questioned the doctor's certificate which boldly announced that he was a chronic cardiac case. A certificate which had cost him £100 in cash in the region of Aldgate Pump. It had taken some extra slick skullduggery, and some more expensive certificates before he extricated himself from the clutching hands of the call-up.

His gesture did not go so far as to bar army officers from the club, after all it was not their fault, and their money was as good as any other. In any event he had shrewdly observed that army officers on leave were not the carefree spenders as were the R.A.F. and navy types. Possibly it was because they were not living so recklessly, were not counting only today, letting tomorrow, if it comes, take care of itself.

For a brief moment, when Wavell's puny army had swept across the desert he had contemplated relenting, but compromised by having a 'Special Desert Night'; put his waiters into Arab burnous, the doorman into a shabby *Beau Geste* foreign legion uniform and the hostesses into voluminous pantaloons of flimsy material and even more diaphanous yasmaks.

The complete wardrobe was bought from a third-rate touring company which had folded up at the outbreak of war, but the dimmed lights concealed the shabbiness.

The transformation was successful and the neo-Levantine owner kept it up.

Even when the tide of war swung against Britain in the desert and the focal point moved much farther east he maintained his desert theme. After all, he argued, the Japs had moved so swiftly that it was all over bar the shouting out there, not many officers would come home on leave, whereas many would spend a week-end in London before leaving for North Africa. In any event there were no fourth-hand far-eastern costumes in the market.

The same problem troubled him momentarily when the West End suddenly became populated with tall, rangy young men who wore odd hats, trousers which closely resembled the tight-fitting pants of a bull fighter, and who seemed to have an almost inexhaustible supply of money and an equally inexhaustible eagerness for whole-hearted pursuit of the fair sex.

Should he change to cowboy costumes, put up the price of drinks and work Texas into the new name of the club? The committee of one, himself to be exact, decided against it, but compromised by renaming the club Main and High—on the advice of a friend who had returned to Britain from America, rather hurriedly via Ellis Island—who urged that 'Texas' might offend the Northern Yankees, whereas every small town had its 'Main-st' and 'High-st' and the junction of them, invariably occupied on the corner site by a drug store and soda pop counter was the meeting-place of the boys and girls.

So Main and High it became.

From some mysterious source came a garishly decorated and gaily lighted box with a number of push buttons which, under the stimulus of money and pressure on any one of the buttons would yield music.

The juke box had arrived. It served a double purpose. It provided almost constant music, of a sort, at little cost and tremendous profit and saved engaging a second pianist.

A couple of rattling fruit machines flanked the juke box to ensnare any odd sixpences which failed to reach the slot which commanded music.

So, all was ready, bring 'em along from the Texas Pan-handle to the Canadian border, Main and High was ready to provide all the home comforts with romantic low lights, attractive girls, still in flimsy pantaloons—at a price—whether it be drink or girls.

The clients seemed to like it and expressed their admiration by freely spending, particularly the group of young R.A.F. officers who were buying expensive gins, not to drink, but for each one to try to pour from arm's length a fair portion on to the bare navel of a hard-faced girl who didn't seem to mind, as she was getting a fair cut on all the drinks bought for the purpose.

A fair-haired, fresh-faced flying officer, with the D.F.C. ribbon on his breast, his features alive and smiling, all but his eyes, bellowed, "Easy chaps, let me do my run up." The group watched him, as tip of his tongue between his lips he lifted the almost empty glass to arm's length, swung it slowly over the girl, said "Bomb doors open", tilted the glass, rapped "Bombs away" and the gin fell an inch or two away from the target.

"Damn target shifted. Keep still, Lois. Fair's fair," the youngster laughed.

The girl swiftly used a R.A.F. scarf to absorb the gin and laughed with him, "Circle around and come in again. Get another gin. Now Sandy's on target. Let the lad in."

Another youth moved forward with a glass.

"Doesn't the Navy join in this delectable target practice? Good for the eyes."

Paton swung around to face the speaker. His eyes lost the momentary warmth which had glowed in them at the sound of a voice. Standing near him was a junior officer of the U.S.A.A.F.

"The Navy has plenty of practice and there is nothing wrong with its eyesight." His voice was chilly as he turned again to watch the rather degrading scene.

"O.K. Bud. O.K. Don't get sore. But by the same token

maybe that same Navy had its eyes shut when three German battleships went through the Channel right on your own doorstep. Catnapping perhaps. Now if we'd been. . . ."

Paton turned again to face the youngster. He could see the boy was slightly drunk. A mocking smile hovered around the rather full, feminine lips. Paton picked his spot. A fraction lower than the sharp angle of the jaw, start it from around his hips, straighten the back leg as it landed and one punch would end all interest in any war, in any navy for a while. He kept his features frozen and expressionless as he juggled with the idea. He knew the formula. There would be a scurry, a heaving tumultuous press of men anxious, or eager to make the scrap more general or to stop it. Peace would ultimately be declared and more expensive drinks would be bought.

The Levantine would see to that by ordering the first round on the house.

Paton had seen other night-club fights start and finish.

Paton thrust his hands deeper into his pockets away from temptation. A wicked, thin-lipped smile slowly twisted across his face.

"I suppose you would have done some of your 'apple barrel' bombing and cleaned 'em up like that, eh?"

"Sure, before breakfast. Right there on the button."

"Speaking of breakfast, you'll have all the chances you want in this, your third war."

"Third war? How come, Bud? And what's breakfast to do with it?"

Paton took a breath. The smile thinned down until it was almost undiluted acid.

"You came in at the closing moment of the last one. You won it, too, didn't you? Then, would it be presumptuous of me to point out that you lost your next one before breakfast—at Pearl Harbour? Had it been a straight fight between you and Japan you would have had Honorable Jap sitting in the White House and Roosevelt cooling his heels in Tokio waiting for terms."

He watched the youngster's eyes closely and poised himself.

He saw the fire blaze a long way back behind the eyes. Here it comes.

Suddenly the boy threw back his head and laughed.

"Brother, you're wonderful. You win. We given it all the air. I missed a point. I might have got in a bit about you always running away, but it was a shade threadbare. Have a drink?"

Paton's smile softened. This lad could take it.

"Right. Mine will be a Scotch. Take a tip. Avoid the gin in this dump—you call 'em joints don't you?"

"Dump, joint, what's it matter. They're all the same. Main an' High. Jeas. You should see the corner of Main and High in my home town. After supper the girls come down . . . I got a jallopy . . . Gee. . . ."

"I said 'Scotch,'" Paton grinned. "I listen much better with a drink in my hand."

In a few moments they stood with glasses framed in their hands.

"Maybe I'll try some of that 'apple barrel' technique you touched on," the American said nodding towards the target practice around the table.

"It will cost you something."

"'Money is made round to go around'."

"If that's by way of being an aphorism, here's another. 'A fool and his money are soon parted'."

The airman chuckled. "Got 'em all on tap, haven't you? You talk like a goddam carpet bagger." He lifted his drink and sampled it. "By the same token, mister. You wouldn't have connected with that right hook."

Paton's eyebrows curved upwards.

"Men have been trying that for years. I'm undefeated middle-weight champion in my college and my neck of the woods. I would have come inside it and salted away a couple around your slats." The eyes were level over the rim of the glass.

Paton threw back his head and laughed.

"I'm getting to like you, damn it, despite you."

"Me too. Maybe that is why Honorable Jap isn't sitting in the White House. . . ."

"And Hitler lording it over Buckingham Palace. Paton is the name. Oliver Paton, Lieutenant."

The American took the outstretched hand. "Mine's Schumacker. Somewhere down the line we had a Heinie. But we're American from three generations back."

"I'm part American. My mother was from Pennsylvania. My father met her in the West Indies."

"So. That makes you and Sitting Bull practically blood brothers. Beeg Chief buy paleface brother another of these rot gut drinks?"

"Ugh. Scotch again?"

"Sure." The young American leaned indolently against the wall with his hands thrust into the tight trouser pockets. "Bring that siphon along. I aim to do some target practice myself."

Paton grinned. "Not likely. It will start a fight, besides, Lois would most likely crown you with a bottle. She gets no cut on the siphons."

"O.K. So it will start a fight. Am I to worry?"

"It would probably embroil me and I don't want any scrapping tonight. I'm down to my last clean collar."

"O.K. Sitting Bull. We smokum pipe of peace."

For a few minutes they stood in comparative silence with their drinks in their hands. It was Schumacker who eventually broke it.

"How come you're like Garbo? 'All alone'."

Paton shrugged, inspected the remainder of his drink, held it for a moment at eye level then tossed it back.

"I'm waiting for somebody. I . . . I . . ."

"And brother, is she keeping you waiting, or is she. Looked like you were waiting to line up for Boot Hill behind a loved one."

Paton raised his eyebrows.

"Boot Hill? And did I say I was waiting for a girl?"

"In order of question. Boot Hill, the traditional name for burial-grounds in western towns. Comes from Dodge City I believe. And the next question—this is the sixty dollar one—

when I see a guy with a look on his face like yours I figure he's either got ulcers or woman trouble. An' you ain't got ulcers. At least," he tapped Paton's glass with a finger nail, "not yet you ain't but you got your sights all lined up."

Paton shook his head slowly and a wondering look took possession of his face.

"You're a human wringer. You might as well have it all. I'm Oliver Paton, aged twenty-eight, temporary acting lieutenant R.N.V.R.—like your coastguard you know, married, no family. If I've missed out anything do let me know," he concluded.

"I've got the framework," Schumacker grinned. "I can fill in the rest."

"Sounds as if you've got woman trouble too."

"Nothing else but. Ever since I was fifteen or thereabouts. My wounds have got callouses on 'em. My common sense tells me that every time I see a woman with that 'come hither' look in her eyes, and thats so often as to be always, I should lit out for the far horizon like a streaking coyote. Ever seen one run? Boy, they just put their hind feet in front of their ears and 'whammo', they're just a small and receding cloud of dust. The coyote, not the women. They don't run much, nor fast."

"And do you . . . er . . . 'lit out'?"

"Not often. And when I do there's always another woman around there, too."

"You married?"

"Brother, that's one scar I haven't got."

"I grieve for one so young and yet so sinful as you."

Schumacker chuckled. "Keep a' grieving, friend. I'm aiming to get deeper dyed no later than this very night. Gee, has she been tough. I've been getting the old 'come hither' 'touch me not' 'come hither' technique for a couple weeks now. I'm right dizzy this moment, but I aim to come out of this spin and my hunch tells me this is my big moment."

"You've room for another scar?" Paton asked anxiously.

"Acres of it. But this one won't scar. She's a hard-hearted momma on the make and with me it's a matter of pride. Just another scalp I want on my belt."

"You might leave your own dangling at her belt."

Schumacker shook his head. "Not this time. I told you. This dame is on the make, she's chilled steel. Somewhere along the line she's got a husband. I figure he's tied up in one of these retreats you Britishers seem so fond of. . . ."

"Huh huh, Yankee, keep off that tack," Paton smiled. "You've got one or two I could mention."

"Maybe. Anyway, she's stood me up now for most part of an hour. I guess I'll give a ring around her haunts to see if she is still in circulation. Maybe I'll want a fist full of pennies. Got any?"

Paton surrendered what coppers he had and the American lounged easily over to a telephone box which was situated beneath a flight of stairs.

"Call for you, Beryl. Are you here?"

She turned her head from the colonel U.S.A.A.F. who sat close to her.

"Ask who it is, darling. If it's you know who take a message."

After a few moments.

"It's Lieutenant Schumacker. He's speaking from the Main and High."

"Goddam, that little runt," the colonel exploded lifting his hand from her smooth arm. "I'll. . . Gee I'll. . ."

"Gently, darling." She purred it in a low, vibrant voice. "We must be grateful. It was he who introduced us. Remember?"

"O.K. So it was he who introduced us: One squawk out of him and I whip him off to Iceland. Maybe that boy'll find this war is rugged, but rugged."

"Yes, darling. Now I'll just talk to him for a moment and come right back to you. Mind nobody steals you while I'm away."

She leaned forward until he could see down the deep, wide V of her gown, until he could see the soft swell of her bosom. She kissed him lightly and patted him on the hand.

"O.K. sugar. I'll hold 'em off."

She turned from him to walk to the telephone and her face hardened. The soft seductive lines disappeared until even the subdued lighting of the small club could not hide the glitter of her eyes nor help with shadows the thin slit of her mouth nor yet the shallow grooves which ran from each side of her nose to the corners of her lips.

"Damn and blast. Double damn and blast. Why the devil did Schumacker have to pick the Main and High of all clubs. I've got to get him away from there somehow."

She played all the soft, purring notes on the telephone forcing even that dispassionate instrument to carry over her seductiveness.

"But darling, I could have sworn you said you would be waiting here. I've been in this place for more than an hour. I'll have to fly soon. I've got another number to do at the Golden Crane . . . no, no, darling. Don't come there. You make me nervous. What? . . . do I indeed. You surprise me . . . I thought you were made of iron. . . . Tell you what, you come around here and wait for me . . . what have I been doing? . . . I was lonely, waiting for you . . . I was indeed . . . then that nice colonel you introduced me to came in and he bought me a drink. . . . Listen, my sweet . . . I must fly . . . hurry around here and wait for me. . . . G'bye."

The hard lines slid back into place as she put the receiver on its arm but she got them under control as she rejoined the American officer.

"Wasn't long, was I sweet? Did you fight them off?"

"Mowed 'em down." He imprisoned her hand again and his dough-white pudgy fingers travelled upwards along her arm. "What d'ya do with young shavetail?"

She bit her bottom lip, decided, against her principles, to compromise with the truth.

"Look, sweet. I must meet somebody for a short while. It's purely business. I have to meet him at a club and Macky's there. I've asked him to come around here and wait for me."

"Aw, hell. It's about time I did some'm about that. . . ."

"Yes, darling. Perhaps it would be a good thing if you broke

it to him tonight that you and I . . . we are . . . I hate to hurt him. He's so young. You tell him while I'm out. Don't be brutal will you darling. He's such a boy . . . and you are such a man . . . a beeg strong man." She slid her voice down the scale half an octave, allowed him one provocative peep down the V of her gown, eluded his eager grasping hand and stood up. "I must fly now. See you soon."

Schumacker lounged back to the bar. "Brother, I've been stood up. I've had the old brush off. And am I sore. This calls for large drinks. Scotch again?"

Paton shook his head. "Make mine a small one. I'm travelling all night and I don't want a sore head in the train."

Schumacker came back later with what looked like a double double filling half a tumbler.

"Good God," Paton said in awe-stricken tones. "Is that straight whisky?"

"Yup. And I aim to top it up with a couple more all same by and by."

He diminished the drink by half. "An' you're waiting for a dame, too. You got my sympathy."

"She'll be here," Paton said confidently. "She's busy but she'll make it."

The noisy group of R.A.F. officers and hostesses surged to the bar and temporarily separated them. When the crowd had been served Schumacker moved towards Paton again and found a girl standing alongside him.

"Oh, Schumacker, may I introduce my wife. She's turned up, you see."

Schumacker looked at her levelly, for a second his eyes flicked towards Paton then back to the girl. She took her cue from him.

"How do you do."

"Right well ma'am. Figure I've seen you somewhere. Face looks sort of familiar."

'Not on your life, you young devil', she thought, although a brilliant smile kept her lips parted.

"I'm in show business, perhaps you've seen me in a show or doing my number at a club. I'm at the Golden Crane this week."

"Maybe so. I'll have to take in that club."

Paton grasped her elbow firmly. "Look dear, I must talk to you. I have to catch a midnight train for Scotland. There is a lot I want to say. Will you excuse us, Schumacker?"

"Sure, sure. I aim to get that bombing game going again. Then I'll join in with the siphon."

"I warn you, Lois will crown you, and somebody else will take a swing at you. Then you'll. . ."

"Fine, fine. That's just what I want. Maybe taking a crack at a man and getting one back helps out. See you sometime."

They sat opposite one another in a small restaurant. She made little or no attempt to soften the hard, irritable lines which savaged their way across her face. There would have to be a break sometime, she felt. Now was as good as any.

"I've been appointed to another command. I have to be on board tomorrow afternoon. At Aberdeen."

He looked hungrily at her. She gave him one level glance and toyed with the small dish of food in front of her.

"My train goes at 11.50 from Kings Cross. I . . . I . . . came up to town at midday today. I waited at the flat for a while. The porter told me you were out . . . he said you were away . . . had been away for two days."

'Damn that gabbing porter,' she thought. 'I'll have something to blister his ears when I see him.'

"I've been down to Brighton. I was offered a spot in a new show and tried out the numbers. How was I to know you were coming up." She leaned back and lit a cigarette.

He picked up the threads where he had dropped them, miserably conscious that somehow he was defending himself.

"I phoned Barney. He told me you were busy. Said you would be at the Main and High around nine o'clock before going on to the Golden Crane. I asked him to pass a message to you. You got it? You must have, because you came."

"I got it," she lied easily. "What time did you say your train was?"

"Ten minutes to twelve." He looked at his watch. "That gives us an hour and a half together, nearly." He tried to cover her hand with his. "Can't we. . ."

"Indeed we can't. I have a number to do at the Golden Crane, and I have to meet an important man before that. I must fly now."

He restrained her with a firm arm and his voice dropped a few notes.

"Beryl. I'm your husband. You are my wife. Ring the Golden Crane and say you can't turn up. Tell them I'm on short leave. I'll catch a train in the morning. We'll. . ."

She looked at him through a film of fine smoke.

'Yes,' she thought, 'you're my husband, sap that I was to get married. Why didn't I just make it an engagement like the other girls. Like Lois at the Main. She was engaged to three men. One R.A.F. pilot and two Americans and juggled them beautifully. But I had to go the whole hog. I had to get married. Just like a sap.' Through her thoughts she heard his voice again.

" . . . Why not come up to Aberdeen in a week or two. There'll be other wives up there. You could stay at an hotel, or we could find digs . . . perhaps a flat."

The suggestion shocked her into a short strident laugh.

"Good God! Can you imagine me sitting knitting in digs waiting for you to come in. I'd go mad. What would I live on?"

"I make you an allowance each month, darling."

"That doesn't keep me in stockings. I have to pay pounds in the black market for coupons, for clothes. I spend more than your allowance on drinks alone. Allowance! Don't make me laugh."

He dropped his head and slowly rubbed his hand across his forehead.

Dispassionately she looked at him. Once he had spelled security for her. The miserable little touring show in which she was singing had folded up when war broke out. They had met, it had been a whirlwind romance and it had seemed wonderful

to have an officer for a husband. He had taken her to night-clubs on his leaves. There she had met people who heard her sing. She had become a popular performer. Men with plenty of money were willing to spend it on her, not without hope of return favours. And they were easily given. Now, he was no longer security. He was a liability.

He lifted his head.

"We seem to be drifting apart. Perhaps if I had some leave later on and went away and talked it all over we. . . ."

"Yes. That's it. Write and let me know. We'll go somewhere, as you say, and perhaps it will work out. Now, I must fly, my sweet."

She stood up with decision.

The train thudded on through the early morning hours. Paton lay back in his shadowed corner with his eyes closed, but he was not asleep. To the tempo of the clacking wheels his mind shifted from one picture to another and through it all came the constant theme, 'It's all over . . . it's all over.' He knew it in his innermost being, but could not bring himself to lay it out in the open. The girl he had married was . . . he shrugged away a definite description, fought hard against giving it a name. He tried to recapture a picture of the laughing girl he had married; of her tears when his first leave was up. It was for her that he had failed himself in a grim hour. It was for her that he had turned back; turned away in a dreadful moment when he should have risked all and gone in for one final desperate attempt to help a sister ship. Could he have done it? Could he have manœuvred even closer, pitted his no mean skill against the clamouring seas, could he least have gone in close enough to pluck some of the men from the raging death which finally engulfed them?

The Court of Inquiry had found that he had done all it considered he should have done and he was quite right not to have hazarded his ship and crew in another desperate rescue attempt.

But he knew different. He knew that he would not take that

risk because he wanted to get back to her. Back to her because he had detected the first cracks in the fabric of their lives.

In the sidelong glances from other officers in the base he detected, or thought he detected, a half-veiled look of contempt. It had become an obsession with him to get away somewhere else, get away to a tough job, to a task where he could redeem himself in his own eyes. He wanted a ship with a crew which did not remind him every waking minute of the supreme moment when he failed.

Finally sleep came.

The colonel U.S.A.A.F. stood before the dressing-table smoothing his already glass-smooth face with a pudgy hand. The mild astringent with which he had rubbed his newly shaven chin stung slightly. He turned sideways and saw, with mild disfavour, that his stomach overlapped the tightly tied pyjama top. He threw back his shoulders, breathed in deeply and drew in the offending, bulbous mass. He deliberately shut his eyes to the doughy colour of his stomach and chest but concentrated on the tanned face and outflung jaw.

"Gee, I must start slimming," he said in a grating, nasal tone, trapping the words well back in his throat. Once again his hand explored the smooth chin. As he turned he saw in a partly opened drawer a photograph. He pulled it out. For a moment he studied the photo of a naval officer.

"Who is this guy? Some sap you have stringing along?"

She shrugged her shoulders deeper into the pillow.

"Put it back," and after a moment, "Sap is right."

"Where is he now?" He persisted running his hands down his chest and pressing heavily against the stomach.

"Somewhere up north."

"On those Russian convoys maybe? Gee, that must be rugged. Some people like their wars but tough. Gee."

He looked sideways at the girl lying in the bed. A frothy confection which revealed more of her shoulders and breasts than it concealed loosened the corners of his mouth, made his

lower lip droop wetly. He felt his heart take up a bigger load with a distinct and heavier thud.

He moved over to the bed his hands fumbling with the cord of his pyjamas.

"Gee, but you look something lying there, honey. Yessir, but something."

He pulled at the cord. The hand, freed from its task reached out and fingers hooked in the low shoulder of her night-gown.

"You won't want this. Take it off," he said thickly stepping clear of the concertinas around his ankles. He switched off the main lights in the room leaving only a subdued one above the bed.

"Me, I'm getting to like this war." And he threw back the bed-clothes.

Captain Lodgeway Campbell leaned back in his chair, crossed his legs, pinched a lower lip between finger and thumb and re-read the letter again.

My Dear Lodge (it ran). You will have to forgive any typing errors. I am picking this missive out myself. Much of it is too personal and far far too unofficial for me to dare dictating it to the charming creature who distracts me under the guise of secretary.

I should have written you before, but you know how remiss I am. Your official letter and unofficial personal note came as a reminder. It certainly poised a sticky one for me. But, I think I have the man. He has been appointed additional to you to command. I gather he had done some first class work—amazing how these volunteer laddies have produced the qualities we wanted in such short time. But they have.

This one, Lieutenant Oliver Paton, R.N.V.R., came within an inch of saving a crew of an Asdic trawler, mined and driven ashore on a beach at night. The C of I gave him full marks, but for some reason he thinks he should have done better. He doesn't know it but we turned a trick cyclist loose on him and the Brainy One says a tough job, the tougher the better will do him the world of good. So, he's your man. Let me know how he turns out.

A word in passing. You might get that sea job yet.

Ramsay, who has done so well as Vice Admiral Dover has been plucked out of there for a big job for Der Tag. He will be looking for a few men and yesterday, no later, I dropped your name before 2 SL. Keep your bags packed.

Clara is well, sends her love. I've taken a small house near Godalming. Stay with us when you come down. I have some leave owing and my farmer friends tell me the pigeons are fairly asking for it.

The hand which signed it was thrust through a sleeve which had one broad gold ring topped by a thinner one.

Captain Campbell laid the letter down on his desk the better to allow his mind to race along several courses he had set for it.

A tap on the door disturbed him.

"Lieutenant Paton, sir," his secretary announced. "Send him in, sir?"

The phone tinkled imperiously and insistently. She rolled over and picked it up momentarily allowing her eyes to rest on the bedside clock. It said 2 p.m.

"Schumacker here," the voice the other end grated.

"Hullo, darling. Have you rung to offer me lunch?" She ruffled her hair with slim fingers.

"I've rung to tell you that of all the goddam bitches I've ever met . . ." and for two minutes the phone poured out undiluted acid then went dead with a decisive click.

CHAPTER XII

ABLE SEAMAN CATER, LTX-328551, dropped his bulky kitbag on the deck of the drifter with a soft thump. The solitary seaman on deck looked up.

"You going off to the buoys?" Cater said briefly.

"That's right, chum. We'll be casting off in a few minutes. Got ter wait for a coupla officers."

Cater reached into the pocket of his jumper, pulled forth a flat tin, opened it and selected a cigarette. Lit to his satisfaction he flicked the dead match over the side, inhaled the smoke deeply, held it with obvious enjoyment for a few seconds then blew it out slowly.

"What ship, chum?" the drifter's seaman asked.

"*Charon*." Cater said it out of the corner of his mouth. His face was screwed up to keep the cigarette in position in one corner of his lips and to keep the smoke from his eyes.

The drifter man showed a flicker of interest. "What was your last ship?"

"*Hardship*." Cater's tones were flat, clipped.

"Blimey. You're joining her sister ship then, chum."

Cater's eyes swivelled over to meet those of the other man's. There was no movement of the head.

"'Zat so. Tough number, eh?"

"N-not so much tough, as hard. Tidy lot of blokes on board, mind," he hastened to add. "But somehow. . . ." The man struggled for the words. ". . . Somehow they seem to do things the hard way. If there's a tough job, it comes *Charon's* way. The old man's a bit of a bastard. Lieut. V.R. Not so much he's strict, or anything like that. He's just. . . ."

"He's just a plain bastard. He's an officer. I heard you the first time." Cater completed the sentence for him. "You don't have to tell me."

"I can see you and 'im going to get on like a couple of whores at a christening. From what I gather from the blokes on her he only talks to you once, when you go on board. After that if there's any talking between you then you're talking to yourself."

"Suits me."

Footsteps clattered on a wooden ladder leading from below and a wizened face showed up framed in the companion-way.

"Them officers on board, Bashful?"

The speaker fully emerged from the doorway. He was a skipper R.N.R.

"Not yet, Skip. How's time?"

"Dead on three. We'll cast off. Them as isn't on board waits for the next boat."

"Give 'em a couple of minutes more, eh?"

"I ain't giving any bloody R.N.V.R. officers a couple of seconds. Stand by to cast off." He turned to Cater. "What ship you for?"

"*Charon.*"

"Jesus. I wish you luck." He climbed into the small box of a wheel-house and jangled the telegraph.

"Nice bloke." The drifter's seaman chuckled. "You and 'im must belong to the same lodge. He doesn't like R.N.V.R. officers either. The only time he sees anybody he likes is when he looks into a mirror."

"V.R., R.N.R. or R.N. All the same to me," Cater clipped off the words. "That goes for him too. He's an officer too."

"Sort of," the seaman conceded. "Cast off that stern line when I shout. I'll take the bow line." He shuffled forward to fulfil his simple task.

Cater moved nearer the light manilla rope and leaned against the rail. As he did so he saw the skipper's beady eyes fixed on him.

"Mind you don't drop that line around the bloody screw when you cast it off." The skipper's gaze locked with Cater's which was equally blank and fixed.

Cater moved away from it without a word although his action was eloquent. It said, as loudly as if he had spoken, "Cast it off yourself."

The skipper grinned wickedly recognizing an opponent of no mean metal.

The telegraph bell jangled again and the drifter started to move. "Cast off for'ard." A moment later the skipper's head jerked out of the wheel-house.

"What about this bloody stern line, Bashful? You want me to part it?"

The seaman shuffled aft indignantly, swiftly cast off the line, hauled it aboard and coiled it neatly.

"Wasser matter? Couldn't you do a simple job like letting go a stern line. You a stoker or something?"

Cater did not answer, but, lifting his eyes saw the skipper's face above him framed in the wheel-house window.

"Bashful always likes to get others to do his job. Don't you Bashful? We call him Bashful because he isn't shy about asking questions. He'll have your life story in a few minutes. Won't you Bashful. Pick yer brains to bits he will."

Cater waited until the skipper had completed his unpleasant little recital. Then he looked at him once, switched his gaze momentarily to the seaman, back again to the skipper and spoke briefly.

"That wouldn't take long on this thing."

The skipper gagged, his face flushed and he retreated inside his wheel-house.

In a few minutes the drifter slowed down and nudged her bow in towards *Charon* which was moored at a buoy.

"Step lively, now," the skipper barked from the wheel-house window. "I can't hold her up in this wind. You won't want the hook, Bashful."

Cater placed his bag alongside the rail then spoke to the seaman, but in louder tones than were necessary.

"I'm not making any jump with that bag. If I fall in the drink whose fault will it be?"

The telegraph jangled, the engines stopped and Bashful stood with the hooked line ready in his hands.

"Hook on," the skipper said briefly.

Bashful hooked on to *Charon's* rail.

Leisurely Cater hoisted his bag to the rail, surrendered it to the quartermaster who was waiting, and as leisurely climbed aboard.

Bashful skilfully flipped the hook clear and the drifter moved away.

"Friendly sort of bloke, I don't think," Bashful said towards the wheel-house window. He retrieved a cigarette-end from behind his ear, lit it and leaned against the rail. "Blimy, he

could have cast off my stern line. No trouble. He's got a gunner's badge up, but he's got a pasty face like a stoker."

"And you've got a big open mouth like a stranded dogfish," the skipper snarled. "Stand by to pass those bags to *Landfall*."

On board *Charon* Cater said briefly, "Where will I find, Number One."

The quartermaster jerked his head briefly. "Leave it," he said, touching the bag with his toe. "You can pick it up afterwards."

With Cater in tow he tapped at the door leading to the companion-way.

"Number One, sir. New rating come on board to join."

"Coming up."

Lieutenant Eric Little, R.N.V.R., First Lieutenant of *Charon*, briefly surveyed the latest member of his crew.

"You are a seaman gunner?"

"Yes, sir. Oerlikon and point fives."

Lieutenant Little found himself harbouring a sneaking liking for this seaman with a marked economy in words. But he refrained from showing it.

"Very well, Cater. Report to the cox'n. You join from p.m. today."

"Aye, aye, sir."

Cater swung away and rejoined the quartermaster who had been standing a respectful distance off but not too far that he couldn't pick up snatches of information.

"I'll give you a hand with that," the quartermaster said genially as Cater lifted the kitbag.

"I'll manage."

"Make way for a sailor," the quartermaster shouted down the messdeck hatchway and preceded Cater. The newcomer stood at the foot of the ladder for a few moments as the quartermaster completed sketchy introductions.

"Scaman Gunner Cater. That's Bunts, the ginger one. Underwood, 'Bandy' for short, Moyle. 'Micky' to you. Keep your eyes on your fags when they're around. Duncan, Ball and Shoreham. He's the killick."

Cater nodded briefly at each introduction until his eyes travelled to the leading seaman. Shoreham was sitting on a narrow plank which ran the length of the outside of his bunk and did duty for a seat.

"Cater knows your home town. He's bin minesweeping out of Liverpool. Shoreham's a scouse," the quartermaster explained.

The leading seaman grinned, placed one elbow comfortably on his bunk and said, "How long did you get and where did you do it?"

Cater stiffened and momentarily his mind travelled back to his short conversation with the first lieutenant but he could recall no mention of anything which could have given his new shipmates any clue. In any event the quartermaster had been in his sight all the time.

Shoreham's grin widened. "Come on, chum. How long did you do and where did you do it?"

Cater's face remained immobile. Eventually only his lips moved as he said, "Sixty days. Portsmouth."

Shoreham's grin developed into a chuckle.

"That still leaves Moyle top man. He did eighty days. At Portsmouth, too."

Cater's eyes flickered towards the man who had been introduced as Moyle. He was a short, dark man with the traditional Irish long upper lip.

"Is dat bastard Scarlett still there?" Moyle said in a surprisingly deep and musical voice.

Cater nodded.

"I thought perhaps somebody might have done him up properly by now." Moyle extended a cigarette and an accompanying lighted match. "Proper bastard he is."

Shoreham stood up and flexed his muscles. His eyes, although framed in a smiling face had none of the warmth of a smile in them. They were icy, pale blue like a frosty winter smile.

"You haven't been out long," he said. "You still got the chalky face of a bloke what's done a longish stretch in the glass-house. See? That's how we knew. But you ain't top. Moyle's eighty days is still the winner."

"Aggravated assault," Moyle said briefly. "Striking a petty officer and attempting to strike an officer. I went the bundle."

"Couple of the others have had anything from ten to twenty days," Shoreham went on. "You're next best."

"And you?" Cater clipped it out.

"Disrated from P.O. Got stinko and went adrift for a couple of days with a woman." He looked at Cater inquiringly.

"I took a couple of holidays. They picked me up in the Isle of Wight."

"You wanted your head read going there. Right on Pompey's doorstep."

"I was looking for somebody." Cater's reply was brusque.

Lieutenant Little tapped at his commanding officer's door.

"The new rating has come on board, sir. Will you see him later?"

Oliver Paton looked up from the book he was reading.

"Presently. There are his papers. Another of the breed. He's overstayed leave, had two lots of cells. One of ten days and the last one sixty days. He really went on the run then."

"They certainly pick 'em for us, don't they, sir?"

"So long as they do their work I am completely disinterested in their background, Number One. I'll see him in half an hour."

"Yes, sir."

"I wanted a chart a while ago. When I found it I discovered it had not been corrected up to date. Jardine can write his letters and play his mandolin only when he has completed his charts. See to it."

"Yes, sir."

Paton's eyes had returned to his book. Little recognized it as dismissal and went in search of the delinquent Sub-Lieutenant Jardine whom he found picking uncertainly at a mandolin.

"Drop that, Mozart," Little said sharply and conveyed the context of the commanding officer's displeasure.

"It must have been a chart of some South Sea islands. Most of my 'ready use' jobs are practically up to date."

"See that all of them are up to date, 'ready use' or otherwise," Number One advised. "Unless, of course, you prefer doing them on your watch ashore."

"Ours is a happy, happy ship, ours is. A happy, happy, happy ship indeed'," Jardine sang softly as he put his mandolin away in its case. "Doesn't anybody EVER smile on this ship?"

Little grinned. "On every third Thursday, but not during Lent."

And later Able Seaman Cater stood before his commanding officer.

Paton perused a clipped file of papers, ran his eye down a separate letter before looking up.

"Very well, Number One. You needn't wait."

As the door closed behind Little, Paton lifted his eyes to the seaman standing before him.

"You have just completed sixty days cells, Cater."

"Yes, sir."

Paton brushed aside the interruption with a quick movement of his hand, then went on in the same even tones. "That is over and done with, so far as I am concerned. All we require of you on this ship is that you do your job and keep out of more trouble."

"Yes, sir." Cater was non-committal, standing at ease, his eyes looking straight before him.

"I see you were once a petty officer, disrated to leading seaman, and again down to seaman, and you have twice done cells."

"Yes, sir."

Paton leaned forward. As he re-read the papers before him his left hand gently caressed his chin.

Cater had resolutely thrust his thoughts behind him from the moment he knew he was being drafted to *Charon*. To *Charon* the ship he believed was responsible for all his troubles. The ship which had raised him to a towering crest only to dash him down to the depths.

But, standing in a room which had once been his as skipper

of the ship, his thoughts defied his mentally imposed ban and came crowding in.

It was in this room he had drunk the first toast with Christian. It was in this room that the deck-hand Pollack died on her first trip. It was in this room that Nobby lay in a pain-laden stupor. It was in this room . . . it was in this room . . . it was in this room he had drank and drank with the empty bottles piling up around his feet when she crashed ashore on the Scottish island.

He heard Paton's voice coming as if from a distance.

" . . . I see you were once considered for promotion to skipper, R.N.R. I doubt if I have the right to inquire into the reasons. And you have the right to refuse to answer. But. . . "

Cater stood still for a few seconds his eyes staring out through the wide port-hole behind Paton's head. From the spot where he was standing he had been able to look out on to the fore-deck, look over the powerful winch drums, out over the fish pounds where men had sweated, and frozen, and laughed and cursed as they went on with the seemingly endless task of gutting and stowing, hauling and shooting. 'Earning it like horses. Spending it like asses.'

For a fleeting moment the beginning of a smile hovered around the corners of his mouth. It disappeared as he realized that Paton was still speaking.

" . . . For a man of your obvious ability it seems tragic."

Cater took a deep breath. Once again he imposed iron-hard discipline on his thoughts.

"I had some trouble over my wife. She . . . she . . . there was another man. I tried to reach her. Overstayed leave. Went looking for her. I was picked up trying to find her." He clipped the sentences short. "Got cells. Went adrift again trying to reach her." As he finished he dropped his eyes to meet Paton's and surprised a look of warm sympathy which disappeared as their eyes met.

"And now?" The query was soft, almost in a whisper.

Cater shrugged.

"I couldn't care less. Don't even know where she is."

"I see. Very well, carry on, Cater."

"Aye, aye, sir."

After he had left Paton sat at his desk balancing a pencil, catching it each time the small movement of the ship toppled it off its poise. At last he clipped the papers together again, thrust them into a folder and pressed a bell-push.

"Tell Number One I would like to see him," he said to the quartermaster who answered the ring.

Little stood framed in the door with suspicious promptitude.

"Cater's book of words, Number One," Paton said extending the file.

"Another graduate from the House of Shadows, I gather, sir."

"You have a wonderful grape-vine working on this ship, Number One. He is, as you say a graduate from the House of Shadows."

"He'll line up, or else. . . ."

"Your trouble, Number One, is that you permit yourself to be dazzled by the obvious. A word of advice. If you see Cater doing nothing with a far-away look in his face find him a job, a tough one." He turned to his desk. "That will be all, Number One."

"Yes, sir."

When he was alone again Paton stood up and helped himself to a drink from his small wine locker. With the glass in his hand he turned and caught a reflection of himself in the mirror.

A man may stand before a glass in a self-critical mood but usually it is criticism of one small feature. He will find his most recent shave is not satisfactory, or the sordid remnants of his most recent binge will bring his focus to bear on the bleary eyes; or inversely a most recent sprucing wash and shave with the hair tidied will give him a momentary glow. To few is it given to be able to stand looking at one's own reflection in a mirror, hold the gaze and see behind the eyes.

Paton did that, facing full square to the figure reflected before him. He lifted the glass until the rim was just below eye level.

"And there, but for the grace of God, go I."
It was a whisper, almost soundless.

Captain Campbell lifted his head at the tap on the door.
"Come in. Oh, Sec., I see Iceland are on the borrow again. We have to lend them an Asdic trawler for a couple of months. It will leave me a bit short, but . . . well, I suppose they are rather busier up there than we are on local escort. Now, let me see, what have we?"

The paymaster-lieutenant rubbed his chin speculatively with an exploring finger and thumb.

"We have *Landfall*, sir. But she's boiler clean overdue. We have a signal that she is salting up badly. We could send her after boiler clean. Or . . ." The speculation spread to his eyes as he fastened them on his superior's face. "We have *Charon*. . ."

"Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings. *Charon* it will have to be. Far be it from me to imply anything, Scratch, but there ARE people who would view your approach to this problem with jaundiced eyes and a touch of suspicion."

"Sir." The secretary put just the right amount of righteous indignation into his voice.

"But not me," Captain Campbell went on blandly. "I wouldn't dream of thinking that you offer two ships, and scrub one right away by saying she wants boiler clean. Neither would I dream of thinking that you enjoy your games of bridge on *Landfall* when she's in."

The paymaster-lieutenant grinned but diplomatically remained silent.

"So, *Charon* it will be. And a nice time of the year to send a ship up Iceland way. It's cold enough here. Send a signal to the commanding officer. I will see him at 1600 and will break the sad news."

After the signal had been scribbled and dispatched Captain Campbell moved over to the window of his office and looked out over the bleak, cold bay which had served as a base from the outbreak of war.

"In some ways I will be sorry to see her go. I know these borrowing tricks, Sec. I do them myself, as you might know. Borrow a ship for a couple of months, then . . . possession being nine and a half points of the law you hang on to her. My God, Sec., when you think of it. This war is moving up towards its fourth year and we still have not got enough ships. Remember that grievous sin when it's all over and you are asked to vote in an election. Somewhere along the line my generation had the pass sold behind them. See it doesn't happen to you."

He filled his pipe and devoted some seconds to the ceremonial of lighting it.

"Charon. One of my better experiments, Scratch." He looked inquiringly at his junior. "Did you say something?"

"I wondered if the commanding officer entirely agreed with that view, sir."

Campbell grinned and blew a slow cloud of smoke towards the ceiling.

"Perhaps not." He emphasized his next words with a pontifical pointing of his pipe stem. "But if he was given it in its entirety he would recognize its value. I doubt if you realized what I was getting at, Scratch."

"I don't think I do, sir."

Campbell returned to his desk and seated himself with crossed knees before he went on.

"A complicated little pattern, Scratch. We had a ship with a bad name. Men were bolting from her because she was labelled 'a killer'. Then we have a new commanding officer for her, after I had her de-commissioned. He was in a state of mind where he didn't care a bent farthing what sort of ship he had, or what happened to him. By degrees we gathered together a suitable crew." He looked up swiftly. "You can grin, Scratch. But quite half her crew have crime lists half as long as my arm, some with cells. Tough boys. Hard bitten lads. Send one of them to a shipload of ordinary youngsters and what happens? He is something beyond their ken. He has to live up to his toughness. He dare not soften up. Result. He stays tough, a pariah if you

like. Acts tough and eventually gets foul of an officer, goes off the rails . . . more cells or more punishments."

For a few moments he busied himself with his pipe again and resumed when it was drawing juicily.

"Take this last addition. He arrives on *Charon* still resentful, still smarting from his cells. Instead of a crowd of awed youngsters he finds that others on board have been down the road. He is no longer alone. He no longer has to keep up his rugged I'm-the-boy-cells-couldn't-bust role. Ever seen a naval prison, Scratch?"

"No, sir."

"It's salutary. I maintain that every junior officer should visit one and see it function. Men are tough before they go there. They act tough when they come out. They are NOT tough in there. Take my word for it."

"So I gather, sir."

"Paton is a good commanding officer. He's hard, it's a brittle hardness, but it's there. His crew, without probably realizing it, feel that they can act human without losing any of that false caste cells seems to give a man. If one of them has done ten days—it's small beer because sitting next to him is a man who has done twenty. And the man who has done sixty knows that his time was merely longer than the others. So, they relax, gradually."

"Applied psychology, sir."

"Abracadabra's a hell of a long word, too, Scratch, and I'm damned if I know what either of them mean. *Charon's* record has been fairly clean recently? No injuries? No . . . ?" He finished the query with lifted eyebrows.

"Nothing serious, nothing more than other ships, sir. Cuts and bruises, stokers with slight burns. . . ."

"And no doleful Joe's whipping it up about a killer ship, eh?"

"I believe one or two of the other crews have touched on the point. . . ."

"And have been promptly swatted by the tough babies on *Charon*. See the working, Scratch? 'She's tough, so are we. We like it that way.' That's the ultimate pattern."

Captain Campbell leaned forward and busied himself with some papers in front of him.

"Sermon's over, Scratch. See if that fair Hebe you ogle outside can rise to some tea."

"I rather think she can, sir."

"Let me see? We had an American destroyer in here two days ago. Nice lads, those Yanks. So, there should be some of those sugary biscuits around. Eh?" he said pointedly.

The secretary chuckled. "I'll make inquiries, sir."

As the paymaster left the room he slowly shook his head and the chuckle was extended.

"And they had the cheek to bar him from sea service because he was short sighted. Short sighted be damned."

Later Lieutenant Oliver Paton was ushered in for his shore interview.

"It won't be a picnic, Paton," Campbell concluded. "You have most of the winter in front of you. But it will have its compensations. It will be hard, and important work. Good luck. You sail at 1200 tomorrow."

After Paton had left Campbell said to the paymaster:

"Sometimes it's good to see a man and his ship working out their joint destiny. Who had the ones with the pink sugar on them?"

The complete incongruity of the two sentences did not puzzle the junior officer for a moment.

"Yes, sir, I'll inquire." He answered in order of rotation.

"Before you make inquiries you might brush those few crumbs of pink icing off your tie," Campbell said blandly. "Then see a signal is sent to Iceland and sail *Charon* at 1200 tomorrow."

Charon's greeting at the base on the lower fringe of the Arctic was in similar vein.

"You will be on patrol mainly. Eight days out, three in." The staff commander was terse. "In effect you will be an extension of our radar. Your beat will be where the Hun might feel inclined to slip a few destroyers out to watch for stragglers from the Murmansk convoys. One good thing. Trawlers are built for this climate and can keep the sea. So, it's up to you."

Paton nodded.

"When will you be ready for sea?" the staff officer continued.

"The moment I am back on board." Paton's answer was brief.

"Very well."

When he had gone the commander smiled. "Sounds a good type. Most of 'em want leave, boiler clean, everything under the sun except a spot of work. Messenger!" He raised his voice. "Get this away." He handed the rating a sheet of signal-pad.

"From SNO Iceland to *Charon* (repeat) Operations. Being in all respects ready for sea you will sail 0600 for Patrol L."

CHAPTER XIII

SUB-LIEUTENANT JARDINE ducked behind the dodger as *Charon* lowered her head and butted into a steep sea whipping the top of it away and slashing it back in an icy sheet of bullet-hard spray. The water lashed against the Asdic hut windows, ran for a second or two, then froze where it touched. Below him and forward of the bridge he could hear the crisp thud of axes as men fought against the encroaching crust of ice which covered her from truck to water-line. For most of his watch she had been dodging along at half speed with the sea on her quarter, riding them gracefully and smoothly taking little water on board. Twice in the four hours she had been lashed by vicious snow squalls which the biting cold wind had frozen over her like a white sheet.

This was the end of her beat and Jardine, after a quick look at the time, felt grateful that for the succeeding watch, when she would be bucking into the rising sea, he would be below.

"Call the watch," he said to the muffled-up figure standing in one wing of the bridge. "And tell the captain it's quarter to four. Tell him wind and sea is rising and it's starting to snow again."

"Aye, aye, sir." The muffled figure staggered away to obey, also thankful that his vigil was almost over.

It seemed to Jardine an extremely long fifteen minutes before

Lieutenant Little joined him on the wind-swept bridge.

"Glass is doing funny things again, Sub.," Little said as he shrugged himself inside his duffel to create a momentary warming friction. "How long has it been snowing?"

"Started a few minutes ago. We had two bad squalls during the watch. I set some of the hands to chopping the ice away from around the bridge and foredeck. I suppose," he went on, "it would be possible for the ice to pile up and up until she would become top heavy."

"Always the bright boy full of cheerful thoughts, aren't you? So long as my watch can swing an axe there isn't going to be any piling up. There's some coffee in a pot on the ward-room stove. It has two virtues. It is plentiful and hot, otherwise. . . ."

"It will suit me. Speed is seven knots. Course, North 5 East. I turned her at 0330. I gave the Old Man a call and a report at one bell. . . ."

"I'm here, Mr. Jardine. You should have called me when you turned."

The tones were nearly as cold and as austere as the bridge and Jardine was thankful for the concealing darkness which hid his flush. He wondered if the commanding officer had heard him use the phrase 'The Old Man'.

"Sorry, sir. I thought one bell was early enough."

"Very well."

Jardine entered the Asdic hut and completed the entries in his log appreciating the comparative warmth of the fog worked up by successive operators.

Out on the bridge Paton said briefly: "I've looked at the icing. It's not alarming. Set some hands chopping at it an hour."

"Aye, aye, sir."

"There is no point in keeping them picking at it all the time like woodpeckers. That cold wind can be exhausting. Wait until there is an accumulation and get it off in one big go."

Paton moved to a corner of the bridge and spent some time in silence assessing *Charon's* reactions to the rising, powerful seas.

Finally Paton said, "Reduce speed, about twenty revs.,

Number One. Call me if the weather gets any worse or if there is any heavy snow. In any case see I get a call at 0700."

"Yes, sir."

Scarcely had Paton turned away when he heard a muffled, metallic voice coming from a voice pipe.

"Bridge? Wireless office, here. Signal coming up."

"Take it Number One. I'll watch the front of the bridge."

"Sir." Little's voice held a degree of urgency. "It's a tanker. She's bought it and is sinking. I make her position about thirty miles north-east of us."

"Mark her position on the chart then come and take the bridge."

In a few moments Paton was crouched over the chart behind the black-out curtain. One finger-nail rested on a pencil cross. With a brass dividers he traced a course to another. He followed this brief scrutiny by tapping the barometer gently. It slipped back slightly.

"Nice prospect," he murmured. "A twenty-five or thirty mile plug into this stuff."

"Bridge? 'Nother signal, sir."

Paton retrieved it from the brass cylinder which he hauled up from the wireless office.

"Um . . . tug . . . destroyers . . . they've got a seventy mile beat before they start to search for her. Wonder what that tug *Saviour* can do. Ten or twelve, perhaps. In this weather, ten hours' steaming. That means searching in the darkness. Um . . . we'll have to alter to North 30 East, better make it 35." He came from behind the curtain and spoke briefly down a voice pipe. "Wheel? Alter course to North 35 East."

"Course North 35 East, sir."

Paton sniffed delicately at the voice pipe. "And put that cigarette out."

Briefly Paton gave Little a *résumé* of the position. "We'll be around the area in three and half to four hours. The tug and destroyers can't make it until this evening."

"What will you do if we find her, sir. Take her in tow?"

Paton made no answer. His chin was lifted and he was tensed.

"Snowing again, Number One."

"Yes, sir. Big stuff this time."

"Increase speed to ten knots. If she'll stand that I'll put it up another knot."

"But she'll beat herself to. . . ."

Paton swung swiftly to the voice pipe, pressed the bell-push. "Engine room. 110 revs." He turned to the shadowy figure at his side. "You are arguing with me, Mr. Little. There are men on that tanker who are being beaten to whatever it was you were going to say."

Little accepted the reproof in silence.

Charon lowered her head and met a racing, white-crested sea, shuddered as she felt the first shock, took most of it over the bow and climbed staggeringly up through it. In flashing white it cascaded over her foredeck and streamed aft defying the clanking freewater ports attempts to clear it. The broken spray, whipped up in the wind allied itself to the bullet-hard snow and rattled harshly against the bridge dodger.

The fight was on, the ring was cleared. It was *Charon* versus the elements with no holds barred.

Through the short, pale, grey day she hammered her way north-east, sometimes fighting through worrying flurries of snow until half-way through Jardine's afternoon watch the sub-lieutenant said, "I make us a little bit north of her reported position, sir."

Paton wearily poised the query against other facts.

"You're probably right, Jardine. This is the extreme point she could be even if she had been out in her dead reckoning. Alter course to a complete reciprocal."

Jardine ordered down the voice pipe. "Starboard three turns steady on South 35 West."

Paton went in again to study the chart. With his pencil he marked out a series of diagonal courses and distances. "Wonder how far she drifted, and at what speed. If she's still afloat. And where in hell are the destroyers and tug."

That question was soon answered with a signal intercepted from them that the tug was a casualty.

Through the night, riding easier as the seas were behind her, or on her quarter, *Charon* plunged on in her search. A dozen times, Paton peering over the bridge thought he could discern the dim shape of the crippled ship. A dozen times the shape writhed away or became a brief flurry of snow.

His back and legs ached with a dull persistent ache. A throbbing headache had taken possession of the front of his head. His eyes felt as if they were in molten sockets.

Daylight was sending out its first tentative forays against occupying darkness when Little returned to the bridge from a quick inspection of the deck.

"Ice is fairly thick along the port side, sir. Deck is like glass, the whaler is full of it and is just like an icicle. It's fairly heavy along the boat deck. I've started a couple of hands going with axes."

Paton nodded. His weary brain was trying to solve a complicated problem of possible drift, effect of wind on his own course. He had been searching now for more than twenty-four hours, searching a grey, menacing sea for a ship which might be a hundred fathoms deep, searching with visibility never more than half a mile, sometimes less than fifty yards as the vicious snow squalls swept over her in whipping fury.

Through his complicated, creaking reasoning came a thin, high-pitched wailing call. He saw Little shuffle across the bridge, look over the after end and heard him calling.

"One of the hands cut himself, sir. I'll slip down and look at it."

"Very well." Almost subconsciously Paton answered. He wanted to close his eyes, if only for a few seconds, but he knew that the few seconds would barter for a minute. And then he would sleep.

From a long way off he heard an urgent voice speaking.

"Number One says it's serious, sir. It's Moyle. Carson's axe slipped and gashed Moyle's head. It's a bad gash, sir. Deep it is, right behind his ear. . . ."

Paton straightened himself painfully, shook his head once or twice.

"Tell Number One to get Moyle into my alley-way. Not to

try to get him down the mess deck. I'll look at him shortly."

"Yes, sir. He looks real bad. Right across. . . ."

Paton looked wearily at the man who tailed off his information and turned to leave the bridge.

Later Little climbed slowly to the bridge.

Paton lifted his chin interrogatively.

Little shook his head. "It's . . . it's bad, sir . . . I think . . . I believe he's dying . . . Carson's axe slipped . . . and . . . it's terribly deep. . . ."

"Where is he?" Paton clipped it out,

"Lying on duffels in your alley-way, sir. I kept movement down to a minimum."

Paton turned away and descended wearily to his accommodation beneath the bridge. A seaman sat crouched inside the door with his arm steadying Moyle from the steady rolling of the ship. A generous swathe of bandage was wrapped around the man's head. Already it was tinged red.

Paton stooped down and crouched over the man. A wave of complete helplessness swept over him. What was there he could do? He was commanding officer, monarch of all he surveyed, controller of the destinies—more or less—of forty-nine men, but what more could he do other than unwrap the bandage, look helplessly at the injury and replace the blood-stained covering.

"Looks bad, don't it, sir?"

The seaman whispered. There was a rising note of interrogation, but at the same time Paton could sense an almost pathetic eagerness for some word which would diminish the seriousness of the injury.

"These things always look bad. Has he spoken since you got him down here?"

"No, sir. He moaned a bit when we moved him."

Paton pulled down the lower lid of the injured man's eye. Again he was being vague. Somewhere in the recesses of his mind he remembered that sometimes a fractured skull would be accompanied by severely bloodshot eyes. Then there was cavitation . . . no . . . no that was wrong . . . cavitation was

creation of an excess of cavity due to a badly matched propeller, or driving engines too fast . . . the propeller . . . he shook his head . . . crepitation . . . something like that . . . a grinding of broken bones. How was he to try for broken bones . . . this was not like the short first-aid course he had done . . . there the injuries had been neat, a fractured arm, fractured leg, with a doctor showing them how, and an attractive V.A.D. nurse to help with the bandages. There had been no blood oozing from under the bandage, the 'patient' had said brusquely 'the damned thing is too tight.' The nurse had helped, nice cool hands she had, and a provocative look when she briefly lifted her eyes. The 'patient' had not been covered with a mixture of dirt-sodden clothes, with a filthy balaclava helmet driven deeply into the wound . . . the 'patient' . . . nice . . . 'not too tightly . . . keep the knot away from the wound' . . . in cases of. . .

Paton jerked up. For a few seconds he had fallen asleep. He shook his head vigorously. Laboriously he climbed to his feet.

"Let me know immediately he comes around. Keep him warm, that will be easy by the radiator, and try to stop him from being rolled about."

"Aye, aye, sir."

On the bridge a youthful Little said, "What do you think, sir?"

"I didn't look under the bandage. He's still unconscious. Why have you only one look-out on the bridge, Number One?"

"I . . . I thought, sir. . . ."

"We are looking for a disabled, sinking ship. Double bank look-outs and keep them double banked until I order otherwise."

"Yes, sir."

Paton crouched in the weather corner of the bridge ducking monotonously from the regular bombardment of vicious, bullet-hard spray. Presently behind him he heard the murmur of voices—Little's and Jardine's. It was Jardine who opened the short conversation with Paton.

"Bad show about Moyle, sir. He looks pretty well all in." After a moment or two he added, "Shall I have a signal coded up for the destroyers, sir? They should have a doctor."

Slowly, painfully Paton allowed the suggestion to struggle through his mind. What could they say? 'I have a man who's head has been split with an axe. Advise please.' How could a doctor a hundred miles away advise him without details. How could he find those details without taking off the bandage and inspecting closely. And what would close inspection show him? A bruised, gaping gash from which blood, and possibly something more vital slowly oozed. And what could the doctor advise. Keep him quiet, give ice to suck . . . no, that was for pneumonia, or was it appendicitis?

"No." Paton barked it. "We are doing all that can be done."

"Could we suggest a rendezvous, sir?"

Paton felt a surge of rage boil up inside him and turned to rend the over-bold sub-lieutenant. But he bit off the words. He was merely trying to be helpful.

"No."

Jardine shrugged unseen and turned away.

Paton put *Charon* on to another leg of his search narrowly watching an approaching snow squall as he did so. It struck the ship with a vicious, rattling whine and visibility in a few seconds was down to a few feet.

Snow, deadly, lethal white snow. He used to long for it when he was a kid. Would whoop for joy when he would wake up one morning to find the countryside wrapped in a virgin-white mantle. It had been soft, feathery stuff which kicked up into a powdery clond under an eager foot. It had showered down lightly from a shrub when the bush was shaken. It would pack obediently under the smooth runners of his toboggan. Snow had been fun. Now it was vicious, a white killer.

The squall tailed away, the last whipping flakes twisting and turning in the wind.

"Ship right astern, sir."

The yell came, high pitched, penetrating, from the after part of the ship.

Jardine, Little and Paton crowded against the back end of the bridge.

"Passed her in the squall, by God," Little said. "Fifty yards from her. Less than half a cable."

"Jardine, look-outs, keep your eyes on her. Let me know if you lose sight of her," Paton rasped.

"Aye, aye, sir."

"Wheel? I want no slack work, now. Do exactly what I say. Is that clear?"

Paton paused by the voice pipe for a moment.

"Who is at the wheel?"

"Cater, sir."

Paton paused again.

"Good."

Below, poised on the grating, with finger-tips at the wheel spokes, a man felt a little glow steal through him. One word, but it was enough, it was sufficient. "Good."

"Signalman, see if there is any life on her."

After an interval, from low down on the bridge of the tanker a light flickered uncertainly.

"Right, tell them I'm going to work around to her weather side and send rafts down. Ask how many men she has."

The lights flickered again, asking and telling.

"Her boats are hopeless, of course," Little said. "She looks like an iceberg. At half a mile you wouldn't know she was a ship."

It was a brief, but accurate picture. Most of her long foredeck was almost continually under water, lifting only occasionally to a higher and heavier sea. Along that the seas broke in a ravenous cresting mass surging against the square-fronted bridge, climbing it, getting a fingerhold, staying there as ice, never ceasing its frantic efforts to claw her down into the depths for ever.

Patiently, with infinite care Paton worked *Charon* around in a wide circle, gradually reduced speed until he was scarcely moving towards the wallowing cripple. On her deck *Charon* held the wooden raft and Carley float ready poised to slip them into the sea.

"Standy by."

A faint, reassuring hail answered from the after end.

"Stand by. All set, sir."

"HOLD IT."

A short, vicious snow-laden squall raced down in screaming fury. *Charon's* engine-room telegraph jangled, she surged ahead.

"I've lost her, sir."

Jardine sounded grief stricken. Still crouched in his corner, vainly trying to shelter his eyes from the whipping, blinding snow Paton felt a gust of frustrated rage shake him until his whole body quivered. Deep down inside him he silently cursed, using all the vile oaths he had ever heard coming from a messdeck.

"Wheel?" His voice was clipped, level.

"Wheel, sir."

"Keep one and half turns of starboard helm on. Let her bear away from the bigger seas then bring her back again. I'm relying on you. It means a large circle around. Understand?"

"Yes, sir. I'll watch her, sir."

"Good man."

Cater stood, legs apart, half-open hands holding the spokes. As he juggled lightly with them he talked to himself, but in an undertone.

"Come on, old girl. Watch this one, now give it the shoulder . . . easy now . . . up and over . . . steady you bitch . . . not bitch, bastard . . . like me . . . watch it now, watch it . . . I'm not giving you a lot of wheel . . . we're a couple of bastards. Bastard's Limited, that's us. Nothing too hot or too bloody . . . come away from this one, MOVE, damn you . . . that's fine . . . belt the next one . . . up she goes. . . ."

Standing near the voice pipe on the top bridge Paton allowed his mouth to slip into a tight, straight-lined grin.

A man was working out his destiny.

"There she is, sir." Jardine's voice climbed up and broke eagerly. He controlled it and added, "Fine on the starboard bow."

The sullen, wallowing wreck loomed through the snow haze. Again Paton nudged *Charon* in closer.

"Away rafts." The order was no sooner given than executed. "Stop engines."

From their attendant lines the rafts and Carley floats drifted down towards the ship. "Slow ahead. . . . Stop engines. Slow astern . . ." with successive orders Paton kept his ship approximately where he wanted her to stay. He knew he could not stay in that spot long but gambled on the eagerness of the tanker crew to cut time lag to a minimum.

Little and his crew aft worked like Trojans paying out line each raft.

"There they go, sir, tumbling into the Carley like billy-o," Jardine reported.

Paton narrowly eyed an ominous thickening to windward. Was it another squall? Would it pass? Would he have to cut lines and try again.

"Wheel here, sir. She's not answering now, sir."

"Very well." Paton didn't bother to explain that he was using the drift.

The voice went on. "My relief is here, sir. . . ?" It ended on a note of interrogation.

"You are not to hand over, Cater. Stay at the wheel until I have you relieved. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"Looks like some injured being helped down into the Carley's, sir."

Paton still watched the ominous grey thickening.

A light flickered briefly from low down on the bridge . . . paused . . . flickered again.

"Everybody off, sir." The signalman made no attempt to hide his jubilation.

"Slow ahead." Paton turned to Jardine. "Tell Number One to take up the slack as I move her down to the rafts."

Carefully Paton edged her down at an angle, giving as much protection as he could and avoiding fouling the lines.

The rafts were not more than twenty-five or thirty yards away, pitching and tossing, one moment on the crest of a wave hanging at an acute, alarming angle, the next moment they were out of sight when the squall reached *Charon* and struck with baffled, screaming rage.

"Hold her to it, Cater. Let me know the moment you have the rafts alongside, Jardine."

The minutes seemed ages long.

"Coming aboard now, sir."

More agonizing minutes.

"Everybody aboard, sir."

"Cut those rafts free. Wheel? Full ahead. Steady on North
40 West."

Paton turned to Jardine. "See that Cater is relieved. Send him up here to me."

He knew that Little would soon be up with a detailed report of the condition of the rescued men. He heard footsteps coming up the metal-shod ladder behind him. A hand rested on his shoulder.

"You are good man. You are good seaman. You are best seaman."

Paton spun around. Facing him was a grizzled, short, thick-set man still wearing his lifebelt over swathing clothing.

They shook hands. "Glad I was in time. I nearly passed you."

"You would have found me. You are good seaman. Good man."

"Now, Captain, down to my room and get warm. I will see you later."

"Indeed, please."

Cater stood at the top of the ladder and moved to one side for the captain to pass him.

Paton waited until the man stood swaying in front of him.

"Good work, Cater. I will see that it is reported to the right quarter. You seem able to get more out of this ship than anyone."

"Thank you, sir."

As Cater reached the lower deck he patted the bulkhead.

"Couple of bastards, aren't we. Bastard's Limited. But we made it."

The ambulance drifter rolled and pitched uneasily alongside *Charon*, the fenders between them making a hollow nerve-

racking groan. The young R.N.V.R. surgeon-lieutenant stepped into Paton's alley-way.

"Nothing vital in any of the tanker crew, mainly exhaustion . . . er . . . your man seems to be in a bad way. Can't tell until I get a look at him. I would have liked to have had him sooner. Still. That's the way it goes. I advise you to get some sleep soon . . . you're near the edge, Captain. Say eight or ten hours . . . good-bye."

He walked to the rail, climbed aboard the drifter and stood with an arm half uplifted.

As the drifter moved away he heard *Charon's* engine-room telegraph ring. He saw a wisp of steam as the windlass heaved away at the anchor. Down came the anchor ball, the telegraph jangled again, water boiled under her stern, she swung away slowly for the boom gateway.

"Good God, are they going to sea again?"

The drifter skipper poked his head out of the wheel-house.

"Who her? Yes, trawler patrol. I know her, all trawler men know her. She's a bitch from hell. A bloody killer for the sake of killing."

The doctor looked at the now shadowy *Charon*, glanced down the hatchway at the group of huddled figures.

"You don't say," he said. "I find it hard to believe."

CHAPTER XIV

I AM *Charon*. I am the largest and heaviest trawler afloat. But I am not trawling now. I am flying the White Ensign, although the ragged, dingy square of bunting flogging itself to ragged threads on my short gaff is dirty grey. But it IS the White Ensign. I have been flying it for four years or more since I commissioned as an Asdic trawler at the outbreak of insanity. And now I am fighting for my life. But I am not fighting alone.

"*Cater*. Stay at the wheel. You are the only man who can do anything with her. You are more value there than chopping ice."

I wasn't designed for this work although the marine architects, the draughtsmen and the builders put all their cunning into my lines so that I could meet and fight just the weather I am meeting now. Look at the flare of my bow, study the lines of my hull, how they swell out to give me a sturdy buoyancy, look at the curve of my sheerline, perfect from stem head to stern. There is no sea born of a northern gale which I could not meet head-on, cleave through, rise triumphantly above and toss back the broken waters off my foredeck.

Men should have been proud to sail in me, proud to have known me. Instead they have made my name one to whisper in dread. In the smoke-filled bars of a hundred dockside public houses, in the forecastles of a thousand ships, in the mouths of men who sailed from Hull, from Grimsby, Aberdeen and Milford Haven, aye, even in the mouths of men who fished from Ostend and Boulogne, from Concarneau and Bremen, and in the mouths of their wives I was 'Charon the Killer'.

"Easy now, old girl. Let this one ride. Back you come. We'll meet this one together. Now then. Bow right into it. Lift. Lift damn you, lift. Tha-a-t's better."

"I was launched in blood, christened in blood and I must live in blood." So their legend runs. So it has grown until good seamen shunned me, went without work rather than sail in me, underwent punishment rather than be part of my crew.

Was it my fault that the wretched little 'Gimpy' Small drank too much the day I was launched. Was it MY fault he lay down to sleep and died where he lay? Did I kill him?

Was it my fault the defective wire snapped and injured Rawling and killed Pollack? Did I make the wire faulty?

"Just you and I. You always were at your best punching into a head sea. Christ. They've overloaded you above decks. Gently . . . gently . . . watch this one, now. Just lift to it."

Is it fair to place to my debit account the death of Fleming? He slipped and fell overboard. Did I make him dizzy? Was his death due to me?

Can I be blamed because Nobby Clarke was careless with a poisoned arm?

I hoped for much under the White Ensign. Was it my fault that a seasick stoker overbalanced and fell into the crankpit. Another dead man added to the long legend. But, who killed him? Was it I?

Answer me fairly. Did I jam the man's arm in between the depth charges? Did I make Perrott delirious so that he fell—or jumped overboard?

Did I break Allen's nerve? Was it I who found the flaw in Jeff's character, the small weakness which made him run away instead of battling it out with me?

Are these two men, my captain and my man at the wheel, the two men who help me to my destiny? And what is my destiny to be? Did we not, we three, save the men from the tanker?

And now this fight has been going on for endless hours. But you must answer. DID I DO ALL THOSE THINGS?

And answer quickly. Because I fear they are tiring. Soon I think I will be alone in this fight. No longer does the crew struggle with their puny axes, trying to chop and smash away the ice which is building up around my bows, my decks, the gun platforms, the bridge, the wheel-house . . . everywhere.

Soon I will be battling alone in this small circle of snow tormented sea, each flake glass hard, each shower of spray settling and holding like clutching fingers pulling down . . . and down . . . down.

"Cater. Are you all right at the wheel?" "Yes sir." "It's up to you, Cater. The ship is iced up. The men can chop no more. Will she stand up to it?" "She's doing her best." "You are both doing your best Cater." "Yes sir."

"We're both doing our best! Why in hell don't I walk away from the wheel? Why don't I leave her to it? What has she done for me? Everything went wrong from the day I took her over—Easy now, swing away from this one. Gently, gently. Shake that lot off, old girl. Christ, she's down by the head like a pig. C'mon. Lift to it. Lift, lift, damn you. Lift or you'll drown the lot of us."

I am sorely handicapped, that huge gun platform on my foredeck is feet thick with ice. With its heavy gun it has upset

my balance. Now the ice is piling up until my forepart bears no resemblance to a ship. See how the wind snatches at it, see how it makes my bow yaw away until fighting back becomes a grim struggle. Those roaring, cresting seas never relent. One follows on another, and some of it stays on board. They are wrapping a glistening shroud around me. The men are beyond weariness. The stokers have refused duty, the steam is dying down, they crouch in shelter with the exhausted seamen who can chop ice no more. Two men only fight with me. Two men who have nothing to fight for. Two men who have strode my lonely decks at night talking when only I was awake to listen.

They know that for hours the seas have been gradually winning and they are not afraid. They know that it is a good fight. They have watched the seas raging like mountains, one calling to the other to engulf me. They have watched them baring their white fangs. They have watched it taking me longer each time to burst upwards through the lead-grey water. They have felt it when for long and agonizing seconds I am held down, thrusting, striving to heave clear. They have seen that when I did break through the sea's wicked ally, the bitter wind, has frozen the spray so that it clings like clutching talons, getting thicker and heavier.

"Maybe it wasn't your fault, old girl. Maybe it was just men. Earn it like horses, spend it like asses. Now dying like rats. Easy now, you're asking too much wheel. Steam is dying down. Without steam I can't help you. Wish we could get around to stern on to it. You'd ride it out then, wouldn't you? That cruiser stern Ben Christian favoured. . . . Ben Christian . . . curse his soul to hell . . . and hers with him. I mustn't let you get beam on to these seas, old girl. Beam on to one will be plenty. Just one and we'll know all the answers."

Soon will come that bigger sea, that rapacious rolling mountain which will be bigger than the others, heavier, more merciless even. I can no longer rear up at them. I am just wallowing, gaining precious moments because the man at the wheel is using his cunning and his skill. But, before it does you **MUST** answer. Did I kill? Did I maim? Did I bring mens' lives down in shattered ruins? Am I **REALLY** a killer? **WAS** that legend true?

And answer quickly. Here comes a frightening sea. Hear it? Even above the fury of the others, even above their fiendish roar, even above the shriek of the wind it is boasting of its power. I can feel the thrust of it . . . it is forcing me around until I will be beam on, wallowing, helpless when its full cresting weight hits me . . . answer . . . ANSWER. . . .

"Hold her up, Cater. For God's sake, hold her up, man."

"She won't answer the helm, sir."

"Leave it. Come out on deck."

"Not if hell has me—and it will—it has already. I'll stick with her. One more heave, old girl. Meet it . . . meet it . . . don't sag away. . . . Curse you, Ben Christian . . . curse you . . . may your soul rot in hell. . . . You built her in blood . . . I ran her in blood for you. . . . That's the way she wants it . . . round you go, you bitch. . . . Swing around and be damned. . . ."

Please answer. Was I born a killer. . . . There will be no time after this sea has roared on it's way. . . .

. . . So I think it better that we part (Ben Christian wrote). Sometimes I find it difficult to believe that we have done what we have done. Thinking over it will not put it right. The time to finish is now, before it becomes merely sordid.

I have arranged with my bank to pay into your account the sum of. . . .

Her eyes raced down the page.

I have also settled the hotel account up to the end of next month so please don't hurry yourself to move out. He signed it plain 'Ben'.

She crumpled the letter viciously and her lips thinned.

Passion had not been enough.

She threw the letter with a quick jerk so that it struck the mirror on the dressing table, bounced back and came to rest against a telegram.

The telegram read: *The Admiralty regrets to report the death of Seaman Edward Cater presumed lost in H.M.S. Charon. . . .*

"Charon was due to be relieved at 1600 hours by Gallic.

Gallic kept rendezvous and waited, hove to, for several hours, but *Charon* did not appear. During the next two days and for succeeding days while on patrol *Gallic* kept look-out and eventually on the sixth day sighted and investigated some wreckage which proved to be from *Charon*. During this period *Gallic* reports that weather was extremely bad with prolonged snow squalls and freezing winds. In the absence of further information it must be regretfully assumed that on resuming patrol *Charon* became overwhelmed and must be considered as lost with all hands. (*Vide Admiralty Report.*)

